



Beauty of the Beast #2 Daughter of a King

Chapter One

The Drawing Of The Lux Revisited

Pluck boldly started up the steps to take her turn at drawing the Lux. There were few things she had no doubts about, and one of those things was that the Lux belonged to her; it had chosen her. She might not be this Serviatrix of Wellspring, actually, she doubted more and more that she was, but the Lux... It was hers, and she had only to draw the sword to prove it. Tabitha had already failed on her first attempt to unsheathe the blade, so Pluck neared the top of the steps when Tabitha took a second attempt to draw the Lux. Tabitha drew the sword and lifted it up high, and it blazed like a Blue Fire Diamond. Pluck froze in place, stunned by what the silent proclamation of the Lux meant to her as the sword, her sword claimed a new mistress. The Lux was hers... How could it choose another? She came upon it at the Port of Pass and there when no one else could, she drew the exquisite blade from its housing and even used its power against Matt and the bandits. Pluck thought back to that time. Maybe the sword used her. Maybe she was the only way the Lux could return to Wellspring and be placed in its rightful owner's hand. She lost all sense of what was going on around her as many Necroms immediately yelled for her death. Votar grabbed her arm as she stood there halfway up the steps in a petrified stance, but he couldn't get her to come back to him. Pluck felt like she died right there. The Lux was more than a thing to her. It... He had become apart of her as if the Lux was a cherished friend, one that at many times had saved her life and the lives of those she cared about. Pluck sensed Votar's firm grasp around her wrist, and she also sensed that her life was gravely in danger, but she couldn't move. He ordered his sister as the crowd grew ever more violent, "Kabal, we need to leave and leave before..." "Do you have a plan, my brother?" Kabal interrupted him as she saw how furious the crowd was becoming. She feared that siding with the Beast Woman would endanger both of their lives, so she ignored her own heart that pleaded with her to help Alba and said, "If you don't, you should distance yourself from the Beast Woman or Gamemnon might declare you a traitor to the crown for siding with Pluck, and the way our King is acting, I don't think he would spare you." Votar uttered, "You would have me abandon her right after I had her put her trust in me?" "I would," Kabal replied. "Gamemnon may have plans to use her against you. Do not aid this Beast Woman." "What would you have me do?" "I would have you..." Kabal began, but she was interrupted by an order from the King. "Seize Pluck! I declare her an enemy of the kingdom, and she must be dealt with!" Kabal's fears had only been words she spat at her brother, trying to convince herself as much as her brother to abandon Pluck, but when they manifested into ravenous creatures bent on Alba's destruction, Kabal panicked, not for herself but for Alba.

Elsewhere and earlier in the sun's cycle...

The cave in the midst of the Crimson Grass...

Fairah paced around the fire as her Sceld tried to console her over Pluck's apparent imprisonment by Gamemnon. A female Calico Winsome Kit had found her way to Fairah and informed her Pluck was fine and would soon return to the encampment within the Valley of Blood. The female Calico Winsome Kit was connected to her twin brother and knew what transpired in her absence, so

she was also able to inform Fairah that Pluck tried to reclaim her sword and was imprisoned. Healen the Velum doctor, Zung, and Zenba remained with Fairah within the cave to try and think of a plan to free Pluck while Quip and Staunch returned to the encampment to see what further information they could gather. "I should not be here," Fairah spoke frantic of what might have happened to her adopted daughter. "I should have gone with the Trife and Dreadgon." Zung spoke, "Quip and Staunch can move around the encampment without drawing any attention. You, on the other hand, would draw quite a bit of unneeded attention." Zenba flew over to Fairah and fluttered in the air in front of the Immortal's face, casting a green glow as she spoke, "I know you're worried about your daughter. I know this because I'm as worried for my friend, but we need to wait here until we know more and can come up with a plan for her rescue." "I understand this," Fairah replied. "'Tis hard to do. I want to be by her side." "I understand..." Zenba began. "Do ye?" Fairah questioned. "I do not think ye understand what I am trying to say. I sense this darkness moving across the land and it seems to be targeting Pluck. I cannot wait any longer. I am going to her." Fairah started out when Quip entered the cave along with Staunch, and she questioned them, "What did ye find out?" Quip spoke, "Gamemnon put Pluck and Tabitha to test soon. See which Lux belongs to." "Pluck's sword?" Fairah uttered. "It would be no contest. Tabitha would not be able to draw the sword. When shall this happen?" "Within next nal," Quip replied. "I cannot wait any longer," Fairah told the others. "I return to Pluck's side." Zung questioned, "Do you have a plan?" "I do not," Fairah replied as everyone followed her out of the cave. "We have till we reach the encampment to come up with one."

The present...

The encampment within the Valley of Blood...

Pluck continued to stand on the steps, staring at the sword in Tabitha's grasp as she whispered, "This can't be happening... This can't be happening... The Lux... It would never betray me." The Dragon Tree sensed her shock and that her dismay kept her besieged in a moment of uncertainty as her faith was challenged, and it attacked her vulnerable state of mind. With its forces so close, the Dragon Tree was able to appear to her in a vision. The malignant darkness that existed just outside the encampment slithered its way towards her while she was trapped in her shock and trapped in the vision, and the Dragon Tree stretched itself out and infected the ground of the Valley of Blood, turning the Crimson Grass black. In the vision, the Dragon Tree spread out its web-like roots and searched the entire valley till it found her. It seemed to grab hold of her and squeeze the life from her. Pluck was already paralyzed and couldn't do anything to stop the vision or the seemingly real effects it had on her body as she gasped for air, but there was more to it than the Dragon Tree wanting to destroy her. It had come to destroy every living thing here, and she couldn't warn those around her of what she saw in her vision. Votar tugged on her again as Caldron Guards moved to grab hold of Pluck. The Mystic Rose detected the invading evil as the Dragon Tree contorted Pluck's body in a bizarre manner, and the Mystic Rose came to her rescue by shooting out a bright light that caused the Dragon Tree to flee from her mind and the vision ended. The Mystic Rose lifted from her back and rose high in the air so that all who gathered could see her. "What is this?" Gamemnon uttered as he recognized the flower. The Mystic Rose glanced around as all eyes turned to her, and then she spoke with great

authority, "Heed my warning. They are marching on this valley. You must prepare to defend yourselves!" Pluck tried to shake off the dread and terror she felt while trapped in the horrible vision, and then she glanced up and relief poured over her for she had been saved from the Dragon Tree and one of her allies had come. She shook off the lingering effects of the vision and then moved down the stairs with Votar and moved over to Kabal as the Mystic Rose remained in the air above her. "Is that some sort of threat?" Gamemnon questioned the flower as he feared all Tabitha had gained by claiming the Lux might be wiped away with the appearance of the Mystic Rose. "Are Pluck's allies coming here to save her?" The Mystic Rose completely ignored him as she searched for GuideMa, and then the Mystic Rose told her, "Many shall gather in the Valley of Blood, but numbers times six shall surround them. The shroud of darkness shall allow enemies who cling to the shadows to join forces with those who despise the light. They shall march, and where they tread, death follows." At first, GuideMa wasn't sure what she meant, but then she realized the Mystic Rose spoke of the prophecy the Giant Lunar Flytrap had spoken to them, so GuideMa hurried to her Duke as the Mystic Rose retook her place on the Beast Woman's back, and GuideMa told him, "I don't believe the beautiful weed is speaking about allies to Pluck. I believe she is warning us of a different enemy. Remember the prophecy I told you of?" "I do," Gamemnon replied, and then he questioned, "Are you saying an army of three hundred thousand is marching on this valley to slaughter us?" "I believe so, my Duke. We need to..." The Dragon Tree wouldn't be ignored and loudly proclaimed its entrance and that of its army as it sent a great blanket of ebony clouds that obscured the sun and turned day into night. Lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, and the wind blew fiercely about, tumbling some unsecured tents. Gamemnon was about to speak to the crowd, but a large screech rose above the wind, followed by screams of those who seemingly were attacked near the outside of the camp. The screeches increased in number as those they targeted cried out for help. Chaos ensued, and the crowd dispersed as many ran for their lives. Gamemnon, Tabitha, King Solom, and the guards hurried down the steps and rushed for the DraKas that were at Gamemnon's tent. Pluck rushed over to Tabitha and reached for the sword she held, but Gamemnon grabbed her hand and prevented her from seizing the weapon. Tabitha continued on along with the King and the Caldron Guards as GuideMa and the Torlawn Guards stayed behind. "Give me the Lux," Pluck demanded. "I can use it against the enemy. Give me the Lux before anyone else dies." "The sword no longer belongs to you," Gamemnon told her as he drew his knife. Votar and Kabal arrived before he could use it. Gamemnon didn't want to have to contend with Votar, so he told him, "Take this filthy Woman and leave my presence if you want her to remain alive." "Go, and I will keep her here," Votar replied. "Go now and take the King to safety." Pluck told Votar, "Don't let them leave. I can help save some people if they would only give me my sword." Gamemnon glared at Pluck again, and then he and GuideMa rushed after the King and Tabitha, and his guards followed. She started after them when Votar stopped Pluck and told her, "Stay here." "My sword," she insisted. Kabal moved over to her brother and told him, "We need to head back to our tent and take our own DraKas and flee." "No," Pluck uttered. "What about the people?" She turned and looked at Gamemnon's group rushing away from them, and then she questioned, "If Tabitha is the Serviatrix, if she is the one to save Wellspring, why is she running away when they need her?" "I don't know," Votar told her as he grabbed hold of her and threw Pluck over his shoulder as she fought against him. "But we have to go." He turned and hurried for his tent as his sister followed after him as she carried Fulgor,

the Globe Spore, and the male Calico Winnow Kit safely in her hands. Kabal led as her brother was close behind, but Pluck fought with him so much, she caused him to stumble and fall. Kabal saw their tumble and rushed back to them. "No time to lie down," she told them. "We have to go." Pluck rose and rushed after Gamemnon's group, and Votar was unable to stop her. She ran through the crowds of frightened and confused people. She had to get the Lux back. She had to save these people. Pluck paused as a murky form like water and yet also like a cloud blocked her path. The murky form approached her and every person who passed close to it fell dead to the ground. Pluck saw no wounds on the dead, but blood did seep from their eyes and nose. She took a step back unsure how to fight darkness itself. Pluck started to turn and flee, but the darkness pounced upon her and consumed her, completely engulfing her in its form. She instinctively held her breath as if she had dove into the depths of a very deep lake. Pluck was even afraid to open her eyes. She felt suspended in the murkiness and couldn't move.

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Far from Wellspring...

Aboard the Seahorn, Virago rocked the little four-seasons-old girl they rescued from the Isle of Kismet while they sat on her bunk in her cabin. Lady Flaxen sat beside her on the same bed and hummed a lullaby for the little blonde girl, Adroit. Both women were exhausted from their ordeal, but they were more concerned with the orphaned child and her wellbeing than their own weary bodies. They hadn't changed out of the dresses they wore to the Isle of Kismet for there were no other dresses to change into. They would have to wait till they reached the Fletching Kingdom before they would have anything clean to wear. Lady Flaxen spoke, "Princess... I mean, my Empress, Adroit has finally fallen asleep. Why not give her to me, and I shall settle her in the other bunk? You then can sleep yourself." Virago nodded and handed the child to her, and Flaxen went and laid the little girl on the other bunk. Flaxen sat beside Adroit for a few mites and then returned to her lady's side. Virago's eyes were shut, so Flaxen grabbed a blanket and covered her up, and then Flaxen started to return to the little girl's side. "Do not go," Virago commanded, and then she patted the area beside herself and said, "Please, stay beside me." Lady Flaxen crawled under the covers as she said, "Are you not too old for me to console you? I used to when we were children crawl into bed with you when storms ravaged our land." "I am just so afraid," Virago admitted. "What attacked us on the Isle of Kismet? Could one of those invisible creatures have boarded this ship? How can Edward and the men fight something that they cannot see?" "I am also afraid of the possibility one of them came aboard, but Edward has stationed six Morgog Sentinels to guard us at all times, and they are just outside this door." Flaxen took her hand and squeezed it as she said, "I also shall guard over you. You are my best friend and always have been. I shall not let anything happen to you." Virago squeezed her hand back and said, "Do not ever put your life in jeopardy. I command you as Empress of the Five Kingdoms. Do you understand me?" "I do, my Empress, and I shall do my best to obey your commandments." Virago released her hand and pulled her part of the blanket up to her chin and gripped its edge. The weight of the crown she still had yet to wear, weighed heavy on her mind. She was no longer just responsible for herself and her lady but a whole kingdom, a whole nation of five kingdoms. Sleep would not find her very easy this sun's cycle. On the bridge of the Seahorn, Emperor Edward, Melee his personal bodyguard, Grand Commander Ardor and his Second, Fracas and his

Third, Vim stood beside the ship's captain as the captain gave orders to his crew. Parry and Sinew were on the deck still resting from their ordeal on the isle. The wind was good to the ships and hurried them along their way. The hot sun bore down on them, but no one complained as invisible assassins always cast a shadow. A sailor reported to the captain, "We have one sailor unaccounted for on the Seahorn and everyone is accounted for on Oceanmight and Blue Squall." "Did we have this sailor when we left the Isle of Kismet?" Edward questioned. The sailor replied, "I was the one who counted everyone on this ship, and I believe I counted correctly but I don't have names to go along with the numbers to double-check." Edward ordered, "Have all the ships make a record of how many are on their ship including their name and position." "Yes, my Emperor," the sailor replied and then rushed off to implement his orders. Edward turned to the captain and inquired, "How long till we reach the Fletching Kingdom?" "Four to seven sun's cycles, depending on the wind," the captain replied. Edward rubbed his eyes as it was becoming harder and harder to keep them open, and then he spoke to the Grand Commander, "Ardor, set up sleeping shifts. Have a third of all the ships take four nal breaks and these sleeping men are to be kept under guard at all times. We may have an assassin aboard our ship." Vim spoke up, "All the ships could have one of these invisible assassins. No one shall know until they strike." Fracas questioned, "Is there any way we can search each ship to see if such a creature has boarded?" "They do cast shadows," Ardor replied. "We could use torches and lanterns to search the darker parts of each ship, but I do not know if that shall be enough." "It might be enough to ease the minds of all those on board," Fracas said. "With your permission, I and Vim shall organize these parties and search." Ardor nodded, and Fracas and Vim left, then Ardor turned to Edward and said, "You should take the first shift and rest, my Emperor. You are exhausted." "You should heed your own advice," Edward said. "I shall," Ardor replied. "I think it best one of us is always awake so I shall take the next shift. Go, sleep if you can." Edward left and Melee followed as Ardor searched the horizon ahead of them. The Grand Commander would be glad once they reached Fletching, but he had a feeling they would not be safe, not after what they set in motion on Wellspring.

Below deck, the holy men's cabin...

Priest Fallac returned to their cabin along with Monk Sophis who carried a small sack. "Where have you been?" High Priest Sagax questioned them. Monk Sophis inquired, "What business is it of yours where we have been?" "Have I not kept the two of you safe?" High Priest Sagax questioned them. "If I am to continue to do so, the two of you need to stay in this cabin." Priest Fallac said, "It is so suffocating in here. I had to go up on deck for some fresh air." "Stay out of the way of the crew and try to stay out of sight as much as you can," High Priest Sagax commanded them. "We have nothing to contribute so let us at least not bother them. The Emperor was kind enough to save us. Remember that and the position we are in." "I have not forgotten," Priest Fallac said. "I know exactly what position I am in." "Did you at least acquire us some food while you were out?" Monk Sophis lifted the sack he carried and said, "We brought back apples." "Did you take or did you ask?" Hight Priest Sagax inquired. "They shall not be missed," the monk told him. "They have barrels full of them down below." "Ask next time," the high priest instructed them. "We cannot afford to be accused of anything while we are on board. I imagine they shall give us our allotment of food if you only ask. Now... Why not hand me one of those apples? I am famished."

Below deck, Virago and Flaxen's cabin...

The two women slept as Adroit climbed down from her bunk and crawled under their bed where she hid the severed arm of the sailor. It would start to stink so she needed to finish it off before the limb was discovered. The child started to gnaw on the flesh and her eyes flashed green and took on a reptile-like appearance. She gorged herself on the arm and devoured what was left, including the bone, then wiped her bloody mouth, and crawl from under the bed. Adroit stood at the end of their bed and watched the women sleep. They seemed to slumber in peace, so she climbed up on the bed and stood, glaring down at them. Sections of her skin crawled with life as what was truly underneath the surfaced revealed itself until Adroit forced the camouflage that made her appear like Man to retake its position. "You are very peculiar creatures," she whispered to them and then waited to see if they would awake. They never stirred, so Adroit added, "I wonder what you would taste like." She paused again, and then she said, "You hold each other in importance. I heard one of you call the other friend." Adroit looked to the spot where she had sat on Virago's lap some time ago, and she muttered, "I have never been held the way you held me. I believe I heard the other one call it rocking." Her eyes reverted back to a child's, she knelt, then crawled in-between the two sleeping women, and nestled herself safely between them.

Chapter Two

A Decision Must Be Made

Moments before Pluck was swallowed by the murkiness, the Mystic Rose covered her with the glistening prism-like curtain; it was the same one she had used to create a protective dome around Pluck on MayPah Beach, but this time the curtain hugged her like a second skin. "Pluck," the Mystic Rose spoke to her. "Pluck, breathe. You are safe within my cocoon so breathe before you pass out." Pluck did as she was told and took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She was completely surrounded by darkness but felt safe in the Mystic Rose's protective embrace. She heard the panicked people in the encampment, but their screams were muffled as if she was deep underwater. "I need to save them. Can you free us from this... whatever this is that has us?" "I can," the Mystic Rose told her. "But I shall not." "Why not? Release me! The more we talk, the more people die!" "Listen to me," the Mystic Rose told her. "If I free you right now, you shall die. You cannot fight what is out there, not without the Lux." "Tabitha has it. Let me go, and I'll take it back from her." "You shall die before you reach the sword. Tabitha and Gamemnon have already taken their DraKas and are racing away from the encampment." "Release me. I have to save the people, Lux or no Lux." "You shall die," the Mystic Rose told her. Pluck curled up in a ball as more and more of the citizens of Wellspring fell by the hands of evil that had invaded the Valley of Blood as she spoke, "I'm already dying inside. I can't stand hearing the people. Please, release me. Let me at least try to save one." "Why have you not asked me to lend you my power?" the Mystic Rose questioned her. "I thought you would have offered it to me if you had regained your strength. Can you help me save the people?" "Do you only want to save one or a few?" "No, I want to save them all. I want to save even those who have perished. Please, help me save

them." "I have not the ability to save those who have already perished, but there is one..." the Mystic Rose started, and then she questioned, "What are you willing to give up to save those who not moments ago were calling for your death?" "No all were calling for my death." "Many did. Now answer my question," the Mystic Rose spoke, and then she questioned again, "What are you willing to give up?" Pluck thought about it as the screams around them died down as there were fewer people for the darkness to kill. "I'm willing to give up my life, now please, let me fight." "Your life will be the price," the Mystic Rose told her. "Your death shall also be very painful. Are you sure you want to..?" "Yes! Now release me!" Pluck yelled, not wanting to think of the payment that lay ahead of her. "Even more have died since we started this conversation. Please, let me save a few." The Mystic Rose told her, "I shall release you, but you shall not be able to save one life. You shall die before you have the chance. Are you still sure you want to..?" Pluck interrupted her, "But you said many people could be saved and that my life was the price." "I did," the Mystic Rose told her. "But neither you nor I shall save one. Are you ready to give up your life even in these conditions?" "I don't understand, but I trust you," Pluck told her, and then she pleaded, "Please, I can't stand their cries anymore. Let me go out there and fight." "As you wish." The Mystic Rose expelled Pluck from the prism-like curtain, and she flung out of the murkiness and landed on her bare feet back in the encampment. Pluck quickly glanced around as the sounds of battle and death surrounded her. She rushed over to a spear near a dead male Necrom, picked up the weapon, and rushed to seven creatures that were of a species she hadn't seen before. They had the head of an eagle with blue plumage all over their humanoid bodies, and talons for feet, and long talons on the end of their fingers. Rows of long feathers covered their arms and these feathers weren't used for flight but to fight. The feathers were heavy like bone and sharp as steel and shot out of their arms with mental commands like arrows. The younger of their race only shot one of these knife-feathers at a time, but the older ones seemed to be able to shoot two, and the largest male was able to shoot three. The eagle beings fought invisible foes like the Shadow Roth that Pluck had fought earlier. The dark thick clouds above them hid the sun so that their enemy cast no shadows. Pluck grabbed a torch that had been dropped and rushed to their aid. She lifted the torch high and as she got closer, it cast weak shadows of their enemies. The shadows were so weak they were hard to spot unless she focused only on the ground. She noticed the shadow of what appeared to be a Shadow Velum armed with a small battle ax. The Shadow Velum started to swing his weapon overhead and toward one of the children of the eagle beings. Pluck stabbed the Shadow Velum in the back with her spear, and the wounded Shadow Velum ran away. She turned and put her back to the eagle beings and faced the eleven Shadow beings still encircling the group of seven eagle beings. Earlier, GuideMa spotted the Beast Woman when she picked up the spear and followed her through the encampment. She watched her fight the darkness and something deep within herself urged her to join Pluck's side and help her wage the war. GuideMa resisted the urgency growing within herself and bore the guilt of only watching when she could have lent many hands. One of the eagle beings in the back of the group cried out as he died and then a second eagle being was also cut down. "We have to run," Pluck told the large male eagle being. "There are too many of them and with only this torch, we can hardly see them." "I agree," he said. "We should..." Some sort of weapon pierced his chest, and he fell dead at her feet before he could finish his sentence. Pluck swiped the torch and saw some sort of large shadow in front of her. She wasn't sure what it was at first, but then she realized a massive Shadow Dreadgon stood before her. "Run!" she

shouted at the remaining four eagle beings as she raced away from the Dreadgon. "Run! I'll make a way for you!" Pluck grabbed the hand of the youngest eagle being and then handed the child off to one of their own kind as she thrust her spear at what only seemed to be air. She thrust three more times and then finally hit flesh. Pluck tackled whatever was in front of her to the ground as she ordered, "This way! Run this way and don't stop." The eagle beings did as she commanded them as she lifted the spear and stabbed whatever Shadow race she had knocked to the ground beneath her. She reached her hand down to see if the spear had indeed killed the Shadow being and she touched their soft furry face. The Shadow being laid gasping for air as she straddled them, and then Pluck realized, they were not only gasping but laughing. The Shadow being was a male of some sort, and he placed his hand to the one she had on his cheek. He seemed to stroke her hand in a sensual way and then Pluck lifted from him and moved away from him quickly. Her heart thundered in her chest, not the thundering of battle, but something stirred within her. She ignored the unusual feelings and looked to the eagle beings as they raced for the edge of camp. Arrows embedded three of the eagle beings, and they fell to the ground as the eagle being child raced on. Pluck started to run after the child but an inky cloud passed by her and the child fell dead. Pluck screamed out her horror, rage, and frustration. She had to save at least one person. GuideMa hid herself in one of the tents as Pluck fought furiously. GuideMa sensed that the Beast Woman wasn't fighting for herself but for those who were dying around her. A tear trickled down GuideMa's face as she watched on. Tabitha should have been there. Tabitha should have been the one to fight their enemy, not the vile Woman. Tabitha claimed the sword and fled. Pluck was rejected by the sword and stayed. A large gash appeared on Pluck's chest, and she fell down to one knee, and GuideMa started towards her but then stopped herself as another group of darkness rushed in between them. Pluck lifted her spear but some force cut right through it and a third slash cut across her neck, and Pluck fell bleeding to the ground. GuideMa knew she just died and something deep within her soul wept. GuideMa turned to flee the encampment and rejoin her Duke when another Woman entered the area who had hair and eyes of white. Fairah and those with her who had rushed from the cave arrived at the encampment a few mites before, and with Fairah's assistance, they were able to keep themselves alive in the madness and mayhem around them. Fairah spotted Pluck as she fought the darkness around her, and Fairah also witnessed her end. Fairah heard Zenba scream beside her as the KellyZing's friend was slaughtered right before their eyes. Fairah also wanted to scream out as she rushed towards her adopted daughter, but instead, she caused the darkness to flee by calling forth a brilliant light. Fairah held up her hand and stopped the group halfway to Pluck. "We can go no closer," Fairah told them. She peered at her adopted daughter who was stained with her own blood as her Sceld mourned the death of their loved one with her, and Fairah said, "Some of the darkness is hiding within the bodies of the dead. Do not touch any." Staunch, the Dreadgon youth, stared at the one who had saved his life. He couldn't speak his sadness or regret in arriving too late to save her. Quip sensed his grief and knew it was the same grief he was experiencing. Quip didn't have many friends, but he considered Pluck one of his dearest ones. Quip noticed the two areas of darkness that had fled were returning, and he said, "We need run. We die too if stay." Votar and Kabal arrived some distance behind Fairah's group, and Votar questioned them as he approached, "Have you seen Pluck? She ran this way." Zung grabbed his sister's arm as she started to fly over to Pluck even after Fairah warned them not to, and he told her, "There's nothing you can do for her. You heard what the Immortal said. The bodies are now areas of

ambush. We have to flee from this encampment before we're also killed." "Where's Pluck?" Votar repeated when no one answered him, no one even turned to him when he spoke. Zenba's weeping and the glum faces of the others stirred his heart to panic. He had to find Pluck, he had to find her and save her.

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Far from Wellspring...

Virago and Flaxen's cabin aboard the Seahorn...

"Adroit, you have not touched any of your food." Virago urged her very concerned for the child, "Please, eat a little bit. You need to eat." "I am hungry," Adroit said. "It has been so long since I ate, but I do not like this food." Flaxen told her, "I know the food is atrocious to eat, but you must squint your eyes and your nose and eat four big spoonfuls." "Why must I squint my eyes and nose?" Adroit asked. "Why to keep the bad taste from going all the way down into your stomach," Flaxen answered her and then she tickled the child. Adroit giggled as she shielded her belly with her little arms and uttered, "That tickles." "It is supposed to," Flaxen said. "I want to see you smile, and I want to hear you laugh. It brings joy to my heart to see and hear these things." "You did make me," Adroit told her. "I tried not to, but you did make me smile and laugh." Virago watched the two, pleased to see some joy on the wretched ship. Adroit turned to her, and she asked her, "Are you not a person of significance?" "What do you mean?" Virago questioned her. "You are royalty, and your friend..." Adroit began as she motioned to Flaxen. "She is also of significance." Virago answered, "I am an empress, but my dear friend, Lady Flaxen is a lower member of the royal court and is..." "Both of you are also of importance," Adroit interrupted, more interested in hearing the answer to her second inquiry. "Maybe the child does not understand the word empress," Flaxen suggested. "Oh... An empress is of importance," Virago began. "My rank places me..." "No... No..." Adroit spoke up in a cute child-like way. "You are of importance and she is of importance because you care about each other. I have heard of such things that belong to those of the outside world. I have learned from you what friends are and this is the importance I speak of." Flaxen leaned to Virago and whispered, "The Isle of Kismet is a very isolated place. Maybe a child of her age is not taught much." Virago told the girl, "We are friends." "Friends make you weak," the little girl told her. "You should hold none as important." Adroit gave Flaxen the weirdest look and said, "This importance can be exploited." Virago leaned to Flaxen and whispered, "She does not understand simple concepts like friendship and yet she understands words like exploit. What were the children of the Isle of Kismet taught?" A knock came to the door, and Brio opened it once Virago bided him to come in. Brio held a box, set it on the table, and then left. "What is that?" Adroit asked. "A bribe," Virago replied. "I know what bribes are, but who is the bribe for?" "You should really call it a treat," Flaxen told Virago. "Treats are for children and those who are children at heart." Adroit re-asked her question, "Who is the treat for?" "The treat is for you," Virago told her as she opened the box and removed a thin red item shaped almost like a heart. "Try one. They are Blood Strawberries. The largest strawberries in all of the Five Kingdoms. These are from my homeland, and they are sliced and dried. They are one of my favorite treats." The little girl took the dried strawberry which was the size of her hand, smelled it, and said, "It does not smell like blood." Virago laughed and then told her, "No silly, they are a fruit, not meat, but you can consider them

fruit blood." Adroit licked the dried strawberry and then her expression became one of bewilderment. She licked it again and liked the taste, and then she took a small bite. "What do you think?" Virago questioned her. Adroit devoured the rest of the fruit jerky. "That should answer your question," Flaxen told Virago. "More," Adroit spoke as she put her little hand out and squeezed her fingers together like she was making a fist, and she did this three times. "I want more." "You can have three more, but you must finish all the food that is in your bowl first and then you can have your treat." Adroit peered at the stew in her bowl, looked at the box of treats, then picked up her spoon, filled it with stew, wrinkled up her eyes and nose, and downed the spoonful. Virago and Flaxen had to cover their mouths and turn away so that the child didn't see or hear them laugh at her for she was so cute and immediately found a place in each of their hearts. It took her some time, but Adroit finished the bowl of food and then she slowly ate her three dried strawberry slices as if they were something very precious to her. "Do you feel better now that you have something in your belly?" Flaxen questioned the child. "My belly does feel weird but I don't think I'm sick. Your food is different and some of it not very pleasant," she stated as she looked to the bowl. "Some of it is very... what word should I say that means good but more so?" "Yummy," Virago answered. "The strawberries are very yummy."

On the deck of the Seahorn...

Fracas approached Edward as he came up from sleeping below. Ardor had left mites before to take his shift. "What is it?" Edward asked Fracas. "We found the body of a sailor, so we had a recount and he is the one first thought to have gone missing," Fracas reported. "Where was he found?" "Below deck near the supplies," Fracas reported. "The body had been tucked behind a barrel." He paused, and then he said, "The thing is, my lord, the man's arm is missing and it wasn't cut off but torn off. I believe we have an assassin aboard the Seahorn." "My fears have come true then," Edward stated. "Shall I wake the Grand Commander." "No, let Ardor sleep. He may not get another chance before we make the harbor of the Fletching Kingdom. I do want you to increase the guard. Any soldier not eating or sleeping is to be on guard. I also want you to double the groups looking for the assassin on this ship and continue to have the other ships look for their own intruder. If we are lucky, the assassin shall keep hidden and not kill another." "That is it, my lord. I do not know if the assassin can wait," Fracas said. "Why is that?" Edward questioned. "What if the assassin must feed on us? How long would a soldier's arm last him?"

Below deck, the holy men's cabin...

Priest Fallac was the only one in their cabin, and then Monk Sophis returned. "What took you so long? Did you find it?" Priest Fallac questioned. "No, I did not find it. It was not where we left it. I was looking when a group of soldiers came in. I slipped out before they spotted me. I shall go back later tonight and look again." "If someone found it, we may have a problem. We should have dealt with it earlier," Priest Fallac spoke as the High Priest entered. "Dealt with what?" High Priest Sagax questioned them. Monk Sophis replied, "We hid his ring when we came on board. We thought it best that it not be found on his person or anywhere in the cabin." Sagax said, "I doubt anyone would have searched our person. They have no reason to, not unless you have done something. Have you stolen any more food?" "Some of their dried meat," Sophis admitted. "Our rations were not enough." "Take half my rations then," Sagax told him. "Do not steal anything else or I shall turn you in myself. Is this understood?" They both nodded. The High Priest

knelt on the floor, and then he commanded them, "Now pray with me, and I shall ask the Great Creator to forgive our sins."

Later, within the captain's cabin...

Edward and Virago sat together sharing a meager meal. "I have missed you," Virago told her husband. "I wish we can share a bed again." "We shall once we reach the Fletching Kingdom. It is very cramped with the accommodations. I share this cabin with six others. I am thankful we are allotted this short time together each evening." She reached over and grabbed his hand and said, "I did not mean to complain. I only miss you. I miss being close to you." "And I, you. We need only endure for no more than six more sun's cycles." She released his hand and asked, "I heard you seek an assassin on this ship." "We believe there could be one. A sailor may be missing," Edward stated. He didn't know why he lied about finding the sailor's body. Maybe he just wanted to shield her from the gruesome details. "I wondered about the extra guards posted around," Virago spoke and when her husband didn't seem to want to speak about the subject, she changed the conversation. "Adroit is coming along as well as can be expected." "I cannot even imagine what horrors she must have witnessed," Edward told his wife. "She may have witnessed her entire family slaughtered." "Should I ask her about it?" Virago questioned him. "Or should I ignore it?" He replied, "I think you should urge her to talk but not force her. I have heard it say that it helps a soldier speak of what he has gone through. I believe it shall be the same with this child." She nodded and decided she would try and coax Adroit into talking each sun's cycle. The presence of the child made Virago think of Pluck. She wasn't sure why an adorable child would inspire her to think of someone she didn't particularly like. Maybe because both Pluck and Adroit were in a world that wasn't their own, and for the most part, they were alone. "You still think of her... Pluck, I mean," Virago spoke, not sure if she should bring up the Beast Woman. "I do. I cared little about her as children and even less once she protected me as a High Guard, but on MayPah beach when she died for me..." He put a hand to his chest and said, "Something within me lifted. The Mystic Rose said I had a curse upon me. I believe the flower spoke of a curse I placed upon myself. I cared for no one but myself. I am no longer that man. He died along with Pluck on that beach. I care now. I care what happens to my people. I care what happens to all the kingdoms I must now rule. I care more for you than I have before, and all because I realize I love Pluck." Edward paused, and then he asked, "Does it hurt you to hear me speak of her in such a way?" "It does. I am your wife." Edward walked over to her and knelt beside her, taking her hand, and he said, "And that is the place you have in my heart. You are my wife. You are my Princess. You are my Empress. I shall always love you." "Who shall come first in your heart?" Virago questioned him. "I must hear this, so do not lie to me." He smiled and raked his hand through her long ebony strands as he said, "You. I placed you there. You placed yourself there. I want to always be honest with you when it comes to our relationship. Pluck shall always have a small piece of my heart but you have the rest. I love you more than myself, and coming from me, it is saying a lot." "You are a different man than the one I married that last day I spent in my homeland," Virago told him. "Perhaps there was a curse on you. Perhaps there was a curse on both of our selfish lives. I believe I have also changed. I believe I was spoiled but with the hardship we endured on Wellspring, I have grown stronger and more considerate of those around me. I believe this was a trait I lacked, and I am glad as Empress I have found it." She leaned over, and they passionately kissed. They would cherish every mite of the nal they were allowed to spend together each evening. Their

love had grown out of adversity, and it was stronger for it. Virago would squash the jealousy she had towards the Beast Woman and be thankful Pluck had saved her from the Dreadgons. Edward also put away his feelings for Pluck. He had his wife to consider and her feelings, so he vowed to himself never to bring up her name again during their private time unless Virago wanted to speak of her. Virago peeked at Edward's small bed in the captain's quarters, and then between elated breaths, she told him, "I do not mind that the bed is small. I want to be with you." He pulled from her, then straightened, and reached out his hand for hers as he said, "Come... There is still time that we might enjoy each other's company in my bed." She took his hand and rose, and they walked over to his bed.

Chapter Three

When An Immortal Loses Control

The Shadow and the Cursed brought death to nearly the entire encampment in the Valley of Blood. They had swiftly and savagely won the first battle in the war for Wellspring. They had declared their intentions and that none could stop them. They believed they could take all of Wellspring before the end of the season. Fairah continued to stare at her lifeless daughter as memories of their past together drifted through her recollection. She hadn't realized how lonely her existence at the temple had been, not until she gave sanctuary to young Pluck. Fairah experienced so much joy with her, and she shared in her heartache and grief as the life Pluck would have had, taunted her from the villages that surrounded the temple's forest. Kabal noticed their disheartened reactions and shocked faces and turned to where they all gaze, and there she saw Pluck, she saw Alba all bloodied and tattered. She put a hand to her mouth to stifle her scream. Kabal didn't want her brother to see Pluck. She knew how her brother felt for her, there was no denying it any longer. Kabal told herself this was where her own grief came from. She was sad for what her brother had lost, not for anything she might have lost. Fairah heard the Trife's warning, so she lifted her voice and commanded, "Duke Votar, take Duchess Kabal by the hand and flee this place. Staunch, if he does not obey my order, I want you to seize the Duke and drag him away. Zung you need to take your sister and fly as far away from here as you possibly can." Zung questioned her, "What are you going to do?" "I am going to kill them all," Fairah replied. "No Cursed or Shadow shall leave this place. I am going to destroy them all. Now quickly, do as I say. I do not know how much longer I can hold back my fury." "We go! We go now!" Quip yelled as he scurried off. "Where's Pluck?" Votar repeated for a third time as he finally looked to where everyone else peered. He saw her lying on the ground and at first, Votar told himself she was only resting from her battle with the darkness. The more he stared at her, the more he knew he lied to himself. Pluck was dead. The one who captivated his heart the moment she was brought before him at Shangra was no more. She had died among strangers. Pluck had died before he told her how he really cared for her. He believed she died thinking that he only despised her. Votar let out a great angry cry and started for Pluck. He raced towards her, forgetting the peril they were all in. Staunch knocked the Duke out, and he carried him away as Kabal ran after them. Zung and Zenba flew ahead of them. Fairah waited about a mite, allowing those who

also loved Pluck to make their escape, and then she approached her daughter. Shadow and Cursed alike attacked the who appeared to be of Man. They had no idea an Immortal walked among them, if they had, they wouldn't have so carelessly attacked her and so quickly died. Fairah didn't focus on the enemy around her, she only eliminated those who prevented her from reaching her daughter. She moved slowly on, afraid at any moment her fury would be unleashed and those Pluck cared about who were fleeing would still be caught up in the wake of destruction, so Fairah didn't allow herself to cry, she didn't allow herself to feel. She needed to wait. She needed to wait till she reached Pluck.

A few mites earlier and elsewhere in the encampment...

JuJu peeked his head out of a supply tent where he had passed out drunk. No one knew he was still in the encampment so none had come to wake the Necrom Immortal. He looked around the encampment and realized they were under attack. His anger came upon those who attacked the unarmed and murdered females and children. JuJu also sensed some powerful being was among the madness, and he headed for the source of the power while he destroyed foe after foe, calling upon the ground to swallow them. He neared the source of the great Maag-llee and saw Fairah. The anger that consumed his demeanor fled as a flutter in his heart reappeared. He hadn't felt this way since the time of Man. JuJu used his Maag-llee and called forth a barrier of earth to encircle the area of about eight tents. Fairah never noticed him, caught up in her grief. She knelt beside Pluck, stroked her mane, then forced her daughter's jaw open so she could shine a brilliant light within. The light cast a murky darkness out, and it slithered up through Pluck's throat and was caught by Fairah. Fairah squeezed the mass of filth and evil, squeezed it till it screeched in pain. Fairah lost control for only a moment, and her rage manifested in a flash of fire which consumed the murky darkness and turned it to ash, and then what was left of it floated away on the wind. She turned to Pluck, lifted her dead form into her arms, and then Fairah finally allowed herself to feel. She wailed and her grief shook the area around her and caused her enemies to cringe in fear. The Shadow and Cursed stuck within the wall of earth with her were caught off from the rest of their forces. They had no one to lead them so confusion and fright ran rampant through their ranks. Fairah continued to hold Pluck as she rocked her in her arms. Her anguish and heartache were so fierce that any unshielded living creature that came within four arm-lengths of her was immediately vaporized. JuJu approached her, seeing how the death of the one in her arms had affected Fairah. He knew he needed to stop her before she destroyed every living thing in the Valley of Blood. "Fairah," he called out to her. "Fairah!" he called again as grief deafened her to the world around her. She turned and stared at him as if she didn't recognize him, and then she finally spoke, "JuJu..?" "It is I," he told her. "I see that ye have returned to Wellspring. Do ye intend to destroy everything here?" "Destroy?" Fairah repeated as if she didn't know what she was doing. "Look around ye," he told her. "Ye's Maag-llee is seeping out and doing ye's unspoken will. If ye do not pull back ye's power, it shall consume this valley and perhaps many territories. Ye shall destroy thousands upon thousands of lives." "The Cursed and Shadow should be destroyed," Fairah told him as she held tightly to her daughter. "Does that include the ones fleeing this encampment? Does that include the animals and plants that exist in the surrounding area?" Fairah for the first time peered at him, and then she said, "They have killed my daughter. They have killed the one who is the Serviatrix. They have killed my heart." "I am here with ye," JuJu told her as he approached, and her Maag-llee threatened his life and

would have vanquished it if he didn't have a protective barrier up. "Take my hand. There is still time." "Time..?" she repeated. "Time. I never even considered it since I was alone, but with ye here..." Fairah gently laid Pluck to the ground, then she stood, and said, "There are only two of us Immortals. The amount we can change shall be limited." JuJu replied, "Yes, but it may just be enough to change the course of history. Join hands with me, and we shall send existence back. We shall reset things five nals behind. Everyone shall retain their memories of the attack, including those of the Cursed and Shadow, but we shall remove the fear associated with the memories and chaos that ensued here. All those who died here good and evil shall be given a second chance." "Thank ye," Fairah told him. "Thank ye for stopping me. I would have destroyed everything in my grief. " "No thanks needed," he told her. "Ye once did the same thing for me." Fairah took JuJu's hands, and they combined their powers and shot out a massive ring of Maag-lee over the Valley of Blood.

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Far from Wellspring...

Virago and Flaxen's cabin aboard the Seahorn...

"My lady," Flaxen spoke as she shook Virago shoulder. "My lady, wake." "What is it?" Virago questioned. Flaxen replied in a frantic tone, "Adroit, she is gone. She is not in the cabin." Virago sat up in a panic as horrible possibilities played out in her mind, and then she commanded, "We shall look for her immediately. Have Brio and the other guards outside our cabin assist us." Flaxen lit a lantern and gave it to her Empress, then she lit one of her own, and they went out into the night and separated to look for the little blonde girl. Two guards remained with each of them while the other two guards set out on their own to look for the child. They searched for a nal before Virago found Adroit in the galley. "What are you doing here?" Virago questioned her as she wrapped her arms around the girl as if she were her own. She hugged her tightly as she said, "I was so afraid something happened to you and I feared..." Virago pulled away from her to get a better look and then under the light of a guard's lantern, she noticed the child's hand was cut and that blood was trickling out of the wound to the floor. There was a knife on the floor next to Adroit with a little blood on it. "I need more light," Virago commanded. The other guard with her shined his lantern on her and the child as the other guard stooped and picked up Virago's lantern and also shined it on them. Virago again examined the child to see if she was hurt anywhere else and found no other injuries. She turned her attention back to the cut, and reddish almost reddish-puplish blood continued to flow down her hand. Virago lifted her own dress and tore off strips of cloth to wrap around the cut. "What are you doing here?" Virago repeated herself. "I got hungry," Adroit replied. "I would have ate in the cabin, but now I am afraid you have become of importance to me, so I thought I would seek another." "I do not know what you are talking about but you have to promise, you have to promise you shall not leave my side again." "What is this promise you ask of me?" Adroit questioned her. "I don't know the word." "A promise is a pledge," Virago explained. "Now promise me." Adroit peered at her for a few moments, and then she said, "I promise." Virago held out her hand and said, "Come. I shall make sure you eat. You do seem to eat more than a grown man."

Below deck, the holy men's cabin...

Priest Fallac was alone again in the cabin. "Did you find my ring?" Priest Fallac inquired as Monk Sophis returned. "No, but I believe I know where it is," Sophis replied. "I shall retrieve it within the next few sun's cycles." "When you say retrieve, are you going to retrieve it as you did the last time?" Sophis replied, "Afraid so. Once I do retrieve it, I believe you should hide it within this cabin where no one shall see you." "I shall." High Priest Sagax returned carrying a tray of food, and he said, "I have our rations." He set the tray down, placed a quarter of his food on each of the men's plates, and then he started eating his half. The Monk and Priest quickly came over and took their larger portions. "I have some news," Sagax began as they ate. "It is believed one of those invisible assassins may be on this ship. A soldier informed me a body was found with his arm torn off." "His arm was torn off!" Priest Fallac uttered, then lowered his voice, and said, "Are you sure?" "They shall not be sure that an assassin is aboard until another person is attacked or the assassin themselves is caught. The crew has no doubt an assassin killed the sailor, but they believe it is a possibility the assassin jumped ship before we sailed too far away from the Isle of Kismet." "It is horrible news," Fallac said as he glanced at the Monk. Sophis repeated his sentiment, "That is horrible news." "Be on your guard and best not to travel alone. An assassin who is invisible can be anywhere," the High Priest warned.

Later that evening within Edward's cabin...

He ate with his wife, enjoying the short time he could spend with her. Edward at first felt guilty enjoying his time of companionship and pleasure, but he remembered what his father had told him. The King had said difficulties shall always arise, conflict can be plentiful, so always make sure to spend time with your family. You do not know what sun's cycle shall be your last so make every one of them count. The people must come first when evolving duty, but your wife and children must always be first in your heart so always make time for them in every sun's cycle. Edward was tired and sacrificed one of the few allotted sleeping hours to be with his wife each evening, but he would gladly sacrifice much more to have her at his side. The sun's cycles they had been back at sea only strengthened their love for each other. Nearly strangers on the way to the Isle of Kismet, and now they had become as close as if they had known each other for seasons. His wife spoke up, interrupting his thoughts, "I must know... Is there an assassin on board?" "I believe so, but it has done nothing to draw attention to itself. Fracas and Vim have searched every dark place by torchlight. I have instructed them to continue once the sun reappears, but the assassin is very clever or long ago abandoned the ship." "If this assassin is very clever, what do you think it has in store for us?" Virago questioned him. "Only evil," Edward replied. "I do not mean to frighten you, but it most likely has some scheme it shall implement or has already set in motion." He grabbed her hand and said, "I do not like that I have put you in danger. If I could cause it to be so just by speaking, I would have you safely back at the Fletching Kingdom." She squeezed his hand back as she said, "I know you would and in this knowledge, I feel I can say I love you. Beyond my parents, I have never told another this. I love you." "And I love you. You are first in my heart," Edward told her. "And you shall always be."

Chapter Four

The Chaotic Peace Before The Storm

Pluck woke up with a start and looked all around, realizing it was earlier in the sun's cycle than when the Shadow and Cursed attacked. She remembered dying by the hand of unseen assassins, but she wasn't where she died. Pluck was in Votar's tent, and she was in his bed. The screams of people dying were still fresh in her mind, and she put a hand to her shoulder and then touch her back, reaching out to the Mystic Rose there. "Did I die?" Pluck questioned. The Mystic Rose was silent, and Pluck feared that maybe something had happened to her, so she reached further down her back and felt the raised part of the flower's image, and it was a petal that she touched with the very tip of her finger. Pluck changed her question and asked, "Are you unharmed?" "I am unharmed. I only endured your pain at your death, and it was a little... unsettling," the Mystic Rose admitted. "The pain that creatures of flesh experience is different than my own." "I did die," Pluck spoke as she flopped back and laid her head on the pillow as she rested her hand on her dingy white shirt. "When I first woke, I thought I dreamed it all except for this unsettling feeling that I have. I don't fear any of my memories or have any dread over them. Are you sure I died?" The Mystic Rose spoke, "I am." Pluck thought of something, sat back up, and asked, "You said you endured my pain. You also told me while we were by the underground lake that if you were absent from me for more than three sun's cycles, I would die." "Yes, I said those things." "You must be connected to me in a way... you must be more than just a marking," Pluck awkwardly spoke, then started to reach back and touch the Mystic Rose again, but the flower lifted from her back and floated in front of her. Pluck started to reach out to her but pulled her hand back as she turned her gaze from the flower and said, "I didn't realize, and I'm sorry that my death caused you pain." "Would you have done any different if you had known this fact?" the Mystic Rose questioned her, then moved so that she looked at her, and then the Mystic Rose asked, "Would you have fled the encampment instead of staying if you had known about our connection?" "I would have..." Pluck started, then lifted her gaze, and looked at the flower. She wrapped her arms around herself as she stated, "I don't know what I would have done. The people's screams... I had to act." "I do not fault you for what you did. You are one I am very fond of and bearing part of your pain is what friends do," the Mystic Rose spoke and then moved so that the bud touched Pluck's forehead. It felt as if the flower kissed her, and Pluck smiled as she told her, "I'm also very fond of you." The Mystic Rose lifted and returned to her back as Pluck found solace in the flower's words. A few mites went by, and then Pluck spoke, "If I died, how am I alive again? You said you had no magic that could help the people in the encampment. The people..." Pluck uttered as she had completely forgotten about them. "Are the others who died also alive again?" She quickly got out of bed before the Mystic Rose had a chance to answer her, and Pluck headed for the next section of the tent where Votar met her. He had slept on a bunch of pillows in the other room. It was still unsettling to her to nearly be repeating the sun's cycle. It was as though she had dreamed about everything that had happened and was about to relive it. Votar looked as confused as her. The sun's cycle before, Votar had her rest her head on his lap, and then as night approached, he had insisted that she sleep in his bed while he kept watch in the other room. She peered at him and he at her, but neither of them said a word as if they were

still lost in their thoughts. Kabal rushed to her brother's side and gawked at Pluck as Fulgor floated beside her, and she uttered, "You're alive." She held the sleeping male Calico Winsome Kit as she stated, "I thought they killed you. I thought we were all going to die." "What happened after I..?" Pluck started to question about her death. "The Immortal," Votar interrupted. "Your adopted mother must have done something." Pluck heard many voices outside, so she rushed out of the tent. People left their tents and were speaking to their neighbors. Pluck witnessed one of these conversations. "I saw you die," a female Necrom pointed to another female Necrom as she spoke. "These creatures came out of the darkness and killed you right before my eyes." "I remember dying," the other female said. "How am I alive now?" In another area, a male Velum spoke to a male Femor, "I distinctly remember sharp objects slashing at my body, but I don't see a mark on me. The nightmare was so vivid." "It was no nightmare," the Femor told him. "Or else we shared similar dreams. I also remember standing beside you as these same invisible blades slashed at my body." Pluck wanted to get a better view of the encampment, so she rushed to the wooden platform where Tabitha and herself had been tested and where Tabitha had drawn the sword. Pluck climbed the steps and peered all around. She saw no dead bodies. She saw only people alive and confused. "Thank you," she spoke to the Mystic Rose. "Thank you for saving these people." "As I said before, I did nothing," the Mystic Rose told her. "In a way, you did," Pluck insisted. "I believe my death brought on a chain of events that caused... I'm not sure what happened, but everyone is alive again." She wanted some assurance and said, "Tell me everyone is alive again." "All those within the circle of Maag-llee are alive again, including any Cursed or Shadow that fell. Everyone was transported back through existence many nals, but they retain their memories from the possible existence." "Possible, so everyone's not safe yet. How long until the Cursed and Shadow arrive here again?" "If they repeat their last pattern, there is less than five nals before they reach the Valley of Blood." "Look," a male Necrom shouted from a gathering crowd. "There's the false Serviatrix." Pluck turned to them a little afraid of the crowd, who in the original existence, shouted for her death. "She's the one who couldn't draw the sword," a different male Necrom yelled. "She was never allowed to try and draw the sword," a third male Necrom chimed in. "Where's the true Serviatrix?" a female Necrom questioned. "Where was Tabitha when the darkness attacked?" a fourth male Necrom asked. "I saw this false one fighting," a second female Necrom spoke. "She fought and died." "She did," the large male from the group of seven eagle beings spoke up. "I was one of the ones she fought for. I believe the one you claim to be the false one is the true Serviatrix." "We all died," a second eagle being spoke to the first. "How can you say that she's the true one?" "We are alive now," the large male eagle being replied. "By some miracle, we are all alive now." "What race are you?" Pluck questioned the large male eagle being. "We are Egle, and I am WyndSoar," he replied. "WyndSoar, if you value the lives of your people, take them and flee this encampment," Pluck told him. "The darkness will soon come again as they did before." "I will have my people leave," he told her. "I will stay by your side and fight." "No, you must go with your people. There may be danger in trying to flee." "I will go with them," he told her. "But if we ever meet again, I will not leave your side. I came to join the Serviatrix and I believe you are the true one." "Tabitha is the true one," a male Necrom insisted. The crowd started to argue amongst themselves. Pluck stared at WyndSoar, he bowed to her, then he turned, and all the Egle left. The crowd continued to argue. "Listen to me!" Pluck shouted at them. "You must all flee the Valley of Blood. The darkness that came before is still coming. There's not that much time. Take what you must and run away

from this place." "What if this false one is right? What if the darkness returns?" a male Necrom questioned. "She's the false one," a female Necrom spoke up. "We can't heed what she speaks." The crowd continued to argue. Pluck wasn't sure if they would listen to her, but she had more important things to deal with at the moment, so she raced down the steps and towards Gamemnon's tent. She pushed past the Torlawn Guards and entered the first section of the Duke of Torlawn's tent, and she saw across from her the Lux, resting on the sword stand. Gamemnon and Tabitha were there talking in hushed tones, and the Roth bodyguard was off standing in a corner. Gamemnon turned to her and demanded, "What are you doing here? Where are your shackles? Did Votar release you?" She ignored him and spoke to Tabitha as the guards came in after her and seized her, "The darkness is still coming." Pluck fought being dragged out as she insisted, "There's not much time." "Take her away!" Gamemnon ordered as GuideMa entered the tent and moved off to the side. "Wait!" Tabitha shouted. "I want to hear what she has to say." She walked over to the guards and told them, "Release her." They glanced at their Duke, and Gamemnon nodded so they released her. Tabitha questioned her, "Are you here for the sword, false one?" Pluck glanced at the Lux and then told her, "We have less than five nals before the darkness reaches us again." "You are here for the sword," Tabitha accused her. "I won't let you have it. It's mine now along with the title of the true Serviatrix." Tabitha took a fighting stance and said, "We could fight for it again, but it wasn't much of a fight the last time." Pluck pointed to the entrance she had just come from and said, "You must tell all the people that they need to evacuate." "You won't have the sword, false one. I laid claim to it along with the title of the true Serviatrix." "Listen to me," Pluck pleaded as she took a step towards her. "Go out and tell the crowd they must flee. There's not much time before the darkness comes once again. They won't listen to me, they'll only..." Tabitha spun her body and kicked Pluck in the face, sending her to the ground. Pluck sat there dazed a few moments, and then she wiped her panther-like nose. Tabitha blooded again and stood to her feet without any aggression in her mannerism. Tabitha was surprised she got back up. "Listen to me," Pluck spoke. "We can still save everyone. We just need to act now." Tabitha used a spin fist on her and nearly knocked Pluck to the ground again, but she managed to stay standing. Pluck held her bruised face as she screamed at her, "Why aren't you doing anything? You're the Serviatrix, you're their savior so save them!" "Is this a trick?" Tabitha questioned her. "I don't believe for a moment you recognize me as the true Serviatrix. You only came here for your sword. I can prove it." Tabitha marched over to the sword stand, grabbed the Lux by its scabbard, marched back over to Pluck, and tossed it at her as she declared, "Go ahead. Try to draw the sword." "Tabitha!" Gamemnon snapped at her. "Take the sword back or I'll have the guards do it." "She wanted her sword back," Tabitha began. "I want to prove that the Lux no longer belongs to her." Pluck had caught the scabbard in her left hand and gripped its leather as she stared at its hilt. She thought about how Tabitha in the original existence had drawn the Lightning Sword, claiming it as her own. Pluck felt the Lux had abandoned her, she felt the sword had only used her to transport it to its rightful owner. She had many doubts, but she also still had hope. Pluck never tried to draw the sword after Tabitha successfully did, and she could try and do so right now. Pluck moved to seize the hilt but pause as she looked back to her left hand. The sword spoke to her and within Pluck's mind, it showed her a future where Tabitha wielded it and saved many lives. Pluck gasped for the vision as she lifted the scabbard to get a better look at it. This sword... it did belong to Tabitha and she had no right to unsheathe it. She slowly moved her right hand away from the hilt never touching

its steel, then she tossed it back to Tabitha, and told her, "I don't want this sword. The sword belongs to you. All I want is for you to be the Serviatrix." Pluck motioned outside as she demanded, "All I want is for you to go out there and save the people. Tell them they have to leave. Tell them they have to leave now before the darkness comes once again." Tabitha caught the scabbard, then listened to Pluck, and drew the sword without hesitation and pointed its tip at her as she said, "I intend to be the Serviatrix. I intend to save Wellspring." "Not all can be saved," Gamemnon spoke. "We should make ready our own escape." "We have to bring my father," Tabitha said as if that was the end of the conversation with Pluck. "Yes, we will bring King Solom with us," Gamemnon told her. "We need to only leave now." "The people," Pluck insisted. "You have to save the people." "I will go get my father now," Tabitha said as she started for the tent flap. Pluck grabbed her shoulders and wouldn't let her leave as she questioned her, "What are you doing?" "Let go of me," Tabitha demanded. She couldn't raise her arms up to strike a proper punch, so she slapped Pluck across the face as she repeated, "Let go of me!" "No, listen to me," Pluck yelled and shook her as Tabitha continued to slap her, and then Pluck finally roared, "Look at me!" Everyone in the tent froze as the roar resonated through their bones. Tabitha peered up at her as Pluck told her, "Only you can save these people. Are you going to abandon them? Are you going to run away and only save yourself? What sort of Serviatrix are you?" "I... I'm the true one." "Then fight!" Pluck told her. "Fight like I have fought you?" "No, I fell quickly to your ability," Pluck answered her. "I want you to fight something that has more teeth. I want you to fight something you may never defeat. I want you to fight your own fears and stay here and save these people." Tabitha finally broke free of her grasp and demanded of her, "How can I? You saw how that darkness came in and slaughtered the people. I can't save them from such monsters." "You can still save them. Go out there and command them as the Serviatrix to flee. Go out there and tell them they must leave the Valley of Blood and they must leave now. There's little time," Pluck told her. Tabitha peered into her determined emerald green eyes and thought she heard the roar of the Woolly Tiger in her own mind. The roar shamed her, and she started to relent as she spoke, "I..." "We will do this thing you have asked of us only if you will do a few things for us," Gamemnon interrupted. Pluck turned to him and asked, "What is that?" "Go out there with us to the platform and declare that you're the false Serviatrix." "If I do this, you and Tabitha will tell the people they must leave now?" Pluck questioned him. "We will," Gamemnon replied. "Let us do this immediately." Pluck turned and headed out of the tent, and the two Torlawn Guards followed her. Tabitha asked of Gamemnon, "What are you doing?" "If Pluck declares with her own lips she is the false one, no citizen of Wellspring will have a doubt that you're the true one. It isn't like she asked for you to stay and fight the darkness. She only asked for you to speak a few words, words we will use to our advantage." He leaned to her and whispered his plans to her, and Tabitha smirked at hearing his scheme, and then Gamemnon pulled back from her and said, "Come... The Beast Woman was right about one thing, there isn't much time." He walked out, and Tabitha paused as if she had just thought of something, and then she ordered the Aviatrix, "There's a red wooden box among my belongings. We will have need of it. Will you fetch it for me and bring it along?" GuideMa considered her request and then answered, "I will, but know... I follow Gamemnon, and I am his loyal servant." "You are definitely a loyal servant. What a remarkable thing it must be for Gamemnon to have someone who is so loyal?" GuideMa glanced at the Roth in the corner, and then she said, "You also have a loyal servant." "Groth," Tabitha laughed out. "He is loyal but not to me. He will protect me with his life

but he doesn't always obey my orders. He's more of a shadow that follows me around everywhere." "Tabitha..." Gamemnon yelled from outside. "Please bring the box. I need to go." Tabitha rushed out of the tent followed by her Roth bodyguard, and GuideMa retrieved the box from her quarters within the large tent and followed after them.

Earlier...

Pluck exited the tent. "There you are!" Votar called out to her as he ran towards her. "I've been looking for you since you left my tent." Kabal was a short distance behind him. He told Pluck, "My guards are not that far behind. I will call them over here and..." "I'm fine," Pluck told him. "I must tend to some business first and then we can talk. Follow me to the platform." He turned and walked beside her as the Torlawn Guards paused and waited for their Duke and then they marched behind Gamemnon and Tabitha. "What is this business that you have to take care of?" Votar questioned Pluck. "That's not important right now. I need for you to promise me something, you and your sister," Pluck spoke as Kabal joined them and walked on the other side of her. "Tell me what it is," Votar whispered as he glanced back at Tabitha and the Lux she carried. "Do you have a plan to retake your sword?" "That sword belongs to her now," Pluck told him as she finally excepted it herself. "I need for the two of you to promise me something. I need for you to promise you won't interfere with what will happen on the platform. No matter what is done or said, promise me you will remain still and quiet. I want to save the people here and for that to happen, I have to admit..." "What's going to happen?" he questioned her when Pluck didn't finish her sentence. "There's no time to explain," she replied. "We're almost there. Please, just promise me." Votar replied, "I promise as long as your life isn't put in danger." She turned to his sister. Kabal told her, "What do I care what happens to a filthy Woman?" "Good enough," Pluck said. "I also ask one more thing of you two. Go prepare your guards and DraKas to leave this place and assist the people in evacuating. Also, see if you can find my friends. I thought they would have come to the encampment by now." He didn't answer her on her second request and Pluck couldn't wait on it any longer, so she turned and headed up the steps to the wooden platform. Gamemnon and Tabitha followed Pluck and stood beside her by the front railing. "Come and gather!" a Torlawn Guard shouted. "Come and gather! Gamemnon wishes to speak!" The Roth bodyguard disappeared into the shade of a tent while GuideMa went and stood by Kabal. GuideMa opened the box she held and peered inside to see what was so important that she bring it. She quickly closed the lid as if surprised by what she found and turned her attention to the platform. Gamemnon moved to one of the Inflated Toads and spoke into its back and the creature's body amplified his words. He stood there and waited on the crowd. "Quiet!" Gamemnon commanded after a few mites had passed and many had gathered before them. "I know many of you have questions about what has happened to us all, but there is no time currently to explain any further than to say a miracle has happened." He paused and then said, "Two Serviatrixes stand before you and only one of them can be the true one." Many in the crowd murmured who they believed was the one and very few spoke Pluck's name. Gamemnon stepped back and nodded to Tabitha. She raised her hands and spoke, "You saw before how I was the one to draw the Lux." Tabitha took hold of the sword and drew it, and it flashed before all the people as she said, "I am the true Serviatrix and even this false one will proclaim it. Tell them, tell them now." Pluck looked out at all the frightened and confused faces and many of them were angry and they directed their fears at her. Pluck gripped the railing in front of her as she glanced at the

female Necrom beside her with the fiery hair, then she turned her attention back to the crowd, and proclaimed, "Tabitha is your true savior. Listen to her and do as she says." Tabitha lifted her voice again and said, "The False One has spoken. I am the true Serviatrix, and she will prove this to all of you with one final proclamation." Pluck wasn't sure what she meant. She thought she would only have to tell the people Tabitha was their savior. Tabitha glanced back at Gamemnon, and he nodded to her again, so she turned and ordered, "Remove this front railing piece." Torlawn Guards immediately ran up the steps as if they had been waiting on their cue. Tabitha grabbed Pluck's arm and had them take a few steps back so that the guards could do their work. Two of the guards grabbed a toad while three more cut the ropes that had temporarily fastened the railing to the platform. The three lowered the front railing to three more guards waiting on the ground and those three guards carried the railing away. The two holding a toad placed it on the corner post and then all the guards left the platform. Tabitha turned to the Beast Woman and ordered her, "Bow before me." Pluck still wasn't sure what was going to happen but she did as commanded. "Pledge the Servir Oath to me!" Tabitha demanded. "Speak the words, 'My body is not my own. My body belongs to the one I am bound to. Their will becomes my will. I will serve them till my body is no more. I say this oath to you, mistress.'" Plucked peered at her curiously, not sure what sort of game Tabitha and Gamemnon were playing at, and then she questioned, "What is this Servir's Oath?" "Just speak the words," Gamemnon snapped. Pluck turned to him and questioned, "Would you have me take an oath when I don't know what I'm pledging? Wouldn't it make the oath meaningless?" "You will become her servant," he explained to her. "You lose your title as citizen, not that you ever had one, and you will become her servant until she dies or releases you." "Did you hear that?" a male Necrom spoke. "They are having the false Serviatrix, the one who comes from Man, they are having her take the Servir's Oath." An older male Necrom spoke, "I thought King Solom's father banned such a degrading practice during his reign." A young female Necrom questioned them, "I've never heard of such a thing. What really is it, and why did you call it degrading?" "There are many servants throughout Wellspring and they are paid for their services," he started to explain. "A servir usually has no choice and serves their master or mistress till they die, but the most the degrading thing about the whole oath is the branding." "Branding? They brand a person?" the young female Necrom uttered. "They do," the older male Necrom answered. "The brand is either placed on the cheek or hand. I can still remember the last oath I witnessed when I was still a cub and hiding behind my mother's leg," the male Necrom spoke as he shivered as if dreading the memory. "A father of a very large family couldn't pay off his debts so he offered his oldest son as a servir. The young male screamed as they branded his face. The mark can never be removed so it remains a mark of shame." Pluck heard their comments and then looked up at Tabitha and questioned her, "This is the price?" "Yes," Tabitha replied as she intently stared down at her with this curious look, and then Tabitha peered over at the steps as a guard brought up a bucket of hot coals in one hand and carried a brand in the other. Tabitha stared down at her with the same look and told her, "If you want me to save all of these people, this is the price." Pluck searched Tabitha's face, expecting to see viciousness and gloating, but all she saw was uncertainty like the female Necrom who nearly mirrored her own appearance challenged her to make such a sacrifice. No, it was more than that. Tabitha challenged her to make such a sacrifice, but it was like she doubted Pluck would go through with it. Pluck turned to the crowd who looked on in silence. There wasn't much time so she had to decide what price she would pay to save them.

She was willing to die to save one, so what was this compared to that? She stood to her feet, leaned to Tabitha, and whispered something in her ear. Tabitha looked at her for a few moments as if deciding something, then she stepped to Gamemnon, and Tabitha whispered something in his ear. He laughed and then left the platform. Pluck stepped back from Tabitha and bowed before her again, and then she said, "My body is not my own. My body belongs to the one I am bound to. Their will becomes my will. I will serve them till my body is no more. I say this oath to you, Mistress Tabitha." The one guard stuck the brand in the hot coals and let it heat up till the metal turned red. The brand appeared unusual to any who knew what a normal brand should look like. This brand was hastily put together and consisted of two metal crests overlapping, and they were connected to a rod of iron with metal cords. The brand consisted of King Solom's coat of arms along with Roth King's coat of arms. Three more Torlawn Guards walked up to the platform and took hold of Pluck to keep her still while the branding occurred. Two of them took a firm grip of her arms while the third one grabbed hold of her head and angled it so that her right cheek was ready to receive the mark. The guard with the bucket removed the branding rod and walked over to Pluck. She closed her eyes and let her body relax. She didn't want to think about the pain and had no idea how to prepare for such a burn. The guard took careful aim for if he messed up the mark his hide would be the one to burn later. The brand neared Pluck's face, and she could feel the heat from it and winced. "Wait!" Tabitha shouted. "Brand her right hand." The guard paused and then he did as instructed, branding the mark on the top of Pluck's right hand. Pluck screamed for the pain and then she clenched her teeth to prevent from screaming any further. Tabitha waved her hand as if motioning for someone and then GuideMa rushed up to the platform. The guard who held Pluck's face had released her before the branding, but the two holding her arms still held her down. "You can let go of her now," GuideMa commanded them as she knelt beside the Beast Woman with the red wooden box she had fetched from Tabitha's quarters. The guards released Pluck, and she moved to touch her own searing hand. GuideMa grabbed her left hand and told her, "Don't touch it. Allow me to tend to it." She could tell the Beast Woman was in a lot of pain, so GuideMa continued to hold her wrist with one of her right hands as she tended to her wound with the remaining three arms. Pluck grimaced as she stared at the brand and her eyes watered for the scorching burn. "Don't you dare cry," GuideMa told her as she removed a canister from the box and started to apply ointment to the wound. "You called this pain upon yourself. You have no one to blame but yourself. You..." she told her as she placed the canister back and grabbed clean wrappings from the box and bandaged her hand. "You can't let them see you cry." Pluck would have wept if GuideMa hadn't encouraged her to defy the ones who had done this to her in the smallest of ways as not to cry. She wanted to grab hold of the Femor's hand that held her wrist and thank her, but with Torlawn Guards surrounding them, Pluck thought she would thank her by not showing anyone who might be watching that the Femor had helped her. GuideMa finished, packed up the box, and left Pluck's side. She straightened and went and stood by the Duke of Torlawn as Gamemnon returned to the wooden platform. Pluck looked up to Tabitha as she still knelt and told her, "Now save the people. Tell them they must flee the Valley of Blood." Gamemnon stepped forward and spoke into one of the Inflate Toads, "Tabitha is your true savior and this proves it. The one who is false has submitted her life to the one who is true. No savior of Wellspring would subjugate themselves to one who is false. Tabitha is the only Serviatrix. Listen to her, and she will save you." She stepped to the other Inflate Toad, and then

Tabitha said, "All of you must be curious as to what happened to us over four nals ago. An evil darkness wept over the encampment and killed many, and yet those who died and those who were wounded now stand here as if that existence never happened. All of you received a miracle. Your lives have been given back to you, but to ensure your continued survival, all of you must leave the Valley of Blood. Flee and take what is only necessary for the darkness will be here soon to take the lives that it had already taken. Go and flee and do not delay. Leave the tents and run from this place. I also will be leaving, so go." The crowd murmured amongst themselves and then they dispersed and heeded the words of the true Serviatrix. Tabitha looked down at Pluck who was still bowing before her cradling the hand that marked her to her, and Tabitha commanded, "Come, my servir. We return to Gamemnon's tent." Pluck rose and walked down the steps. Tabitha started to follow her when Gamemnon grabbed her arm. "Why didn't you burn her face?" he questioned her. "Her shame would have been more prevalent." "Pluck is mine now," she answered. "Why would I want to mark such a pretty face as hers?" He released her, not sure he liked what was starting to emerge in his Serviatrix, and Tabitha followed after Pluck. Earlier before the branding but after Pluck had whispered to Tabitha and in turn, Tabitha had whispered to Gamemnon who left the platform. Kabal moved over to her brother and questioned him, "The Servir Oath they speak of. What is it?" "Something I will not allow," Votar vowed as he started for the platform. "My friend," Gamemnon spoke as he walked up behind Kabal. GuideMa bowed to him and took a few steps back. Votar turned, and then he declared, "You will not stop me. I intend to save Pluck this time." Gamemnon pulled a dagger and placed it to Kabal's throat as he declared, "You will only be saving one female. Will it be your sister or the Beast Woman?" Kabal grumbled, "This is the second time you have threatened my life." She then vowed, "I don't believe there will be a third." Votar stated, "You dare threaten the life of the female you proclaim to love." "I won't get into a debate with one who failed to see the coming of the Serviatrix and then sided with the False One," Gamemnon told him. "All I want you to do is stand there while Tabitha claims her rightful place." Votar turned as the guard with the brand walked up the steps. He started to run to Pluck. "If you leave that spot, all you'll return to is your sister's dead body," Gamemnon told him. Votar faced his once friend as GuideMa moved around to the back of the group. "Believe him, my brother," Kabal told Votar. "I believe Gamemnon has found a new love so for him to slit my throat would be an easy thing." "I can't believe it," Votar stated. "I can't believe Gamemnon would hurt you." He turned to save Pluck when GuideMa came up behind him and hit him with a shovel that had been leaning against one of the tents. "Votar!" Kabal screamed, and then she wriggled in Gamemnon's arms till he released her. She rushed over to her brother, knelt beside him, and yelled at the Femor, "What have you done?" "He is alive," GuideMa told her as Gamemnon headed for the platform. She leaned down to Kabal and told her, "Gamemnon would have killed you this time." GuideMa straightened, then followed after her Duke, and waited at the bottom of the platform.

The present...

Votar stirred as he regained consciousness, and he held his head as he muttered, "Pluck..." "She is alive," Kabal told him. "For how long, I do not know. She has gone to Gamemnon's tent." "I have to save her," Votar insisted. "Your approach with Gamemnon has been all wrong," she told her brother. "You run after Pluck half-heartedly forgetting you're a Duke with the power to back up that title. I suggest you return to our tent, gather your guards, and deal with Gamemnon as

you should have from the beginning." "You're right," he spoke as he stood wobbly to his feet. "I did rush out of my tent after Pluck without any thought. I'll do as you suggest and then I'll claim what is mine." "What claim do you refer to?" Kabal questioned him as they rushed back to their tent. "Are you referring to Pluck?" "I was referring to my pride," Votar answered. "I don't know if I have a right to claim her heart. Let me regain my pride, and then I can beg her forgiveness, and see if I have a right to her heart."

Sometime later...

Gamemnon's tent...

Pluck entered and walked over to the sword stand that had held the Lux and looked down at the chest the stand rested on. She turned as Tabitha, the Roth bodyguard, Gamemnon, GuideMa, and a few guards entered. "Kill the Beast Woman," Gamemnon ordered his guards. "You can't do that," Pluck told him. "I don't remember swearing that I wouldn't kill you. We fulfilled our bargain up on the platform. I can take your life when it pleases me." "You can't," Pluck told him as she motioned to Tabitha. "My body belongs to her now. Only my mistress can take my life." "Ridiculous," Gamemnon spat. "I will have your head when it pleases me." "I can't let you do that," Tabitha told Gamemnon. "My servir is correct. She belongs to me and only I can say when and where she dies." Tabitha walked over to GuideMa and took the red wooden box she was still carrying. She nodded her thanks to the Femor and turned back to the Duke. "I finally have a servant of my very own and a servir at that. I don't wish to destroy her at this time." Groth spoke up from the corner of the tent, "The rite is not finished just yet. Your servir must receive a new name. She no longer has a right to Pluck, so give her a new name." "We don't have time for this nonsense," Gamemnon argued. "Kill the Beast Woman and be done with it." "I'm to name her as if she is really mine," Tabitha spoke up as if she had received her very own pet she would solely be responsible for. "I guess she's really mine. I don't know why I sounded so excited or surprised." Tabitha thought about what name would be fitting her very own servant as Gamemnon grumbled under his breath, and then she finally said, "I have no idea what to name her. Anyone have any suggestions?" Pluck stood there holding her hand as the pain slowly went away thanks to the ointment. She had saved the people in the encampment. She heard them busy themselves with packing their beasts of burden. They were no longer screaming, they were no longer in jeopardy, and she no longer had to bear that she couldn't save them. GuideMa glanced at the Beast Woman as Tabitha continued to think and Gamemnon looked like he would murder all of them, and then GuideMa spoke up, "You could call her Alba." Pluck turned and looked at her with this puzzled expression, not sure why the Femor would suggest such a thing. "It's very pretty like her," Tabitha said. "I like it." "I don't think you should give her such a name," Gamemnon said. "We should give her a name befitting the short existence she'll be alive." "I heard the name spoken by Duchess Kabal," GuideMa stated. "The Duchess said the name was more of a curse, and that it means one who is hated and despised by all." "The name does belong to the Beast Woman," Gamemnon uttered. "I still think it's pretty so from now on, one who looks almost like me, you'll be called Alba." Pluck said nothing only nodded her understanding as she remembered her conversation with Kabal when she uttered the cruel name. "It's time we leave," Gamemnon spoke up. "I'm having my guards pack up what is only necessary and they'll be finished soon. If the darkness is to enter the encampment as it did

before, we have a little over three nals before they arrive." "Point me to a DraKa and I will board it. I and my bodyguard and new servir." "We can't take the Beast Woman with us," Gamemnon stated. "I already told you," Tabitha began. "Alba is mine, and she goes where I go." "I can't let you have your way this time," he told her. "The Beast Woman can't come." "Then don't take me with you," Pluck walked over to Tabitha and knelt before her, "Command me to stay behind. Command me to fight the darkness when it comes." Gamemnon laughed and said, "Don't believe her lies. She will only run away." "Did I not take the oath?" Pluck questioned him. "I will not run away. Command me to fight the darkness and defeat it." The Torlawn Guard who had been in charge of the brand entered the tent carrying the now cool brand with him. He gave it to Gamemnon and Gamemnon removed the two medallions that had made the brand. "I meant to give these to you earlier," Gamemnon began as he motioned to the two medallions that had been bound to each other with gold wire. "The crest of the Necrom Kingdom and the crest of the Roth Kingdom," he spoke. "You will unite these kingdoms that have been at odds with each other." Tabitha peered at the medallions, and then she said, "You branded my servir with these?" "I did and soon I'll have a craftsmen take these two medallions and make them one. I'll give them to you once it's finished." Groth spoke up again, interrupting their conversation, "There is one final thing that must be done to complete the rite." "What is that?" Tabitha inquired. "Your servir must give you something that is very important to them. This item will become another symbol between the two of you, and it will represent the bond that has been established this sun's cycle. You must keep this item on your person at all times as your servir now carries around your brand." "My brand. I want to see my brand," Tabitha spoke, and then she commanded, "Show me your hand." "Maybe you should wait," GuideMa suggested. "Give the mark time to heal so that you can see it." Tabitha kept her blue gaze fixated on the kneeling Pluck as she repeated, "I want to see my brand. Show it to me." Pluck glanced down at her hand, then she unwrapped the gauze from around it, and showed it to her new mistress. Tabitha took the hand and examined the marks, and she looked a little worried as she said, "The brand... It has already healed." Gamemnon moved over to Tabitha's side and also peered at the brand, and then he said, "This should also be proof that we should kill the Beast Woman now and be rid of her." "No..." Tabitha replied. "She belongs to me, her and her life and she will remain alive for now." "Finish the rite," Groth spoke again. "Finish the rite so we may leave." Tabitha glanced at her bodyguard, then turned to Pluck, and said, "Alba, do you have such a token as he mentioned?" Pluck looked down at her own person. She didn't own much and what little she did have, Gamemnon had stolen from her. "This is a waste of time," Gamemnon insisted. "Let us leave. The vile Woman has nothing to give to you of any worth." "But I do," Pluck spoke up as she removed her beloved pin from her shirt. She put her hand out that clasped the pin as she said, "I have this." Tabitha held out her hand and accepted the token, and then Tabitha examined what was given to her. Gamemnon peered at it and then he said, "Worthless thing. It has no value." "You may believe it has no value," Pluck began. "But to me, it has great value. The animal is a Charging Black Elk and symbolizes the Fletching Kingdom which is my home, and it represents all the people who I was charged to protect there. The pin itself is an emblem and proclaims to all that I'm a High Guard, and the pin was also given to me by Commander Han who I looked upon as a father." Pluck smiled when she thought of Han but the fond memory was also mingled with sadness as she spoke, "I can still remember the High Guard vow he taught to me. 'We do all things to glorify the Creator, we pledge loyalty to the crown, we swear to protect the Fletching people

and property, and above all, we forfeit our lives for the Royal Family." She paused and then she said, "I am bound by my oaths and this pin can attest to it." "A father," Tabitha repeated. "The pin is something this Han gave you so love is carried within it. This item is very precious and has greater value than some in this room can know." She paused, thought of something different, and then Tabitha stated, "You had said earlier that you don't know who your real father is." "I did. I never knew my mother or my father," Pluck replied. "The insignia may seem worthless to you, but it's all I have left in this world." "I already told you I know its value, and I accept this token as a brand between us as the one you now wear on your hand," Tabitha said. "And I will cherish this pin as you have cherished it, and I will keep it with me at all times. It will remind me of what I now own. Let us go." Pluck listened once again to the people outside the tent busying themselves with leaving. She remembered seeing the elderly and children among the people, so she stood, walked over to Tabitha, and said, "Command me to stay behind. Command me to fight the darkness when it comes. It will be here before everyone is able to escape." "I just acquired you," Tabitha told her. "I won't let go of you so easily." "Many people will die again if the darkness is not slowed down," Pluck spoke. "Don't you mean defeated?" Gamemnon questioned. "I don't think I stand a chance against so many who are so powerful even if I had the Lux," Pluck told him. "I might be enough of a diversion and buy the people even just a few more mites to escape. I plan to go out across the Crimson Grass and meet them at the outer edge of the Valley of Blood." Tabitha told her, "I won't let you." "The true Servatrix would want to save the people at any cost, including losing a vile Woman as myself," Pluck told her, then knelt before Tabitha, and said, "My mistress..." Tabitha giggled, still not used to the fact Pluck was hers, and then Tabitha said, "Speak." "I can't bear to see one person die here again. So many died before and I was powerless to..." Pluck admitted, cringing at the thought of her own weakness, and then she continued, "I couldn't even save one life. Please..." Pluck begged. "Let me try to save them." Tabitha realized that in the other existence when she fled the encampment like a coward, the one who the sword rejected had stayed and fought the frightful darkness. She felt ashamed of that time and hated that her servitor had unintentionally brought it up. Tabitha looked to Gamemnon, and he told her, "The vile Woman can't come with us, so either kill her or leave her. Those are your two options." "She doesn't stand a chance against those vicious creatures," Tabitha uttered. "I care not," he told her. "The vile Woman claims she may slow them down before she dies. Command her to do so. We leave now and take nothing but what is on our person." "I don't feel it's right to leave her here," Tabitha stated, feeling worse by the moment over her shame and for the idea of leaving Alba behind. "I have taken the Lux from her. What sort of chance would she have?" Pluck pointed to the chest the sword stand rested on and said, "If you allow me to have what is in the chest, I can fight the darkness a little longer and buy you and the other people time to escape." "The chest?" Tabitha repeated. "What's in the chest?" "Never mind that," Gamemnon spoke. "She can't have what's in the chest; it's mine." "You said we were leaving everything behind but what we're carrying. Whatever is in the chest wasn't that important before, but now that she wants it... I'll see what's inside," Tabitha spoke and started for the chest. "No," Gamemnon said as he moved and blocked her way. "You also can't have what's within." "My Duke," a Torlawn Guard entered and spoke. "We have assisted King Solom's guards and they and their DraKas are ready to depart." "Time for us to go," Gamemnon told her. "What's in the chest?" Tabitha questioned, then pushed past him, and tried to open it. "It's locked." "There is nothing within the chest," Gamemnon told her. "The key was

lost long ago, so it is only used as a seat for my guards or as a pedestal for the sword stand." Tabitha took a step back from the chest, and then told Pluck, "You may have whatever is within the chest." She walked over to Pluck who was still kneeling, and then Tabitha leaned to her and whispered into her ear, "Do this and survive. I command you to return to me. You don't need to defeat the darkness. You only need to buy us enough time to escape and then return to me." Tabitha straightened as she said, "I've never had my very own servant before." Tabitha moved over to Gamemnon and wrapped her arm around his and said, "We should go." Gamemnon glanced at the locked chest then nodded, and they both walked out. The bodyguard started after them. "Roth," Pluck called after Groth. He turned to her, and she questioned, "How did you know so much about the Servir Oath?" "The Necrom King might have outlawed it in his land," Groth began as he showed her his own branded hand. "Other kingdoms still practice the rite." Groth turned and followed after Tabitha. GuideMa slowly followed, paused at the tent flap, glanced back at Pluck, and then followed after her Duke. Pluck let out a long sigh as the fear she kept bottled inside finally escaped. She was so sure Gamemnon would succeed in killing her this time, but the Great Creator blessed her with a few more nals to live. Pluck took a few moments to collect her thoughts and fears and placed them in the back of her mind again. She moved over to the empty sword stand and stood there as Votar entered the tent with a few Shangra Guards. He saw that she was alone so he motioned for his guards to go back outside as Kabal entered and stood behind her brother. Votar started to speak, but Pluck spoke before he had the chance. "I thought..." Pluck began as she put a hand to the sword stand and kept her back to him, and then she said, "I thought you had abandoned me. I thought I had become unworthy in your eyes. I thought you belonged to me, but... I was wrong about all those things. You didn't abandon me. You have been here all along as if you were standing beside me holding my hand. You don't belong to me as if you were an object. You are a friend, a cherished friend who I need now more than ever." "I also need you," Votar proclaimed to her. She turned and questioned, "How long have you been standing there?" He didn't answer her, rushed over to her, wrapped his arms around her, and held her tight. Pluck was startled by his action and his affection so she stood there in his warm embrace stiff with shock. Her shock lessened and her body relaxed in his tenderly firm hold. The fears and uncertainties she had kept deep within herself broke free, and she placed her head on his chest, wrapped her arms around him, firmly grasped his shirt on his back with both her hands, and wept. Votar felt her trembling in his arms and started to stroke her soft crimson mane. Traces of green blood from the River Centipede still caked her body and clothes, but he didn't care and continued to console her. He would do anything to ease her pain. "I will never abandon you again," Votar vowed to her. "I will never see you as unworthy in my eyes. I do belong to you as you belong to me. My heart belongs to you, and it will always belong to you. I will always stand beside you and hold your hand. I am your friend as you are a cherished friend to me, but you are also much more. I love you Pluck, and I want you to become my wife." Kabal was stunned by what her brother proclaimed. Pluck stopped crying and stood in his embrace a few moments more, then she pulled from his arms, looked up at him, and said, "I'm not sure what just happened. I was talking to another and you came in and..." "Another..?" he repeated as he glanced around the tent. "Who were you speaking to?" She motioned with her finger to the sword stand and answered, "Him." "I don't see anyone. Are you saying you see some person over there?" "No, I'm not seeing things. He is there, but he has been tucked away. I believe I can coax him out," Pluck said as she walked over to the

chest, looked down at it, and said, "Will you come to me? I have need of you." A brilliant light showed from inside the chest. Pluck stepped back and shielded her eyes as lightning crackled around the chest, then the wood disintegrated, and the Lux rose into the air and came to float in front of her. Pluck reached out, grabbed hold of its scabbard, gripped its hilt with her other hand, and drew the sword. Power crackled across the blade and around the hilt and her hand, but the power didn't harm her. Pluck had become Tabitha's servitor, but another bond, a bond that existed before had become stronger between her and the Lux. The sword never abandoned her; it... he never chose Tabitha over her or used Pluck to bring him to Wellspring. The Lux had never been apart of the test between the two Serviatrices. Another sword had participated. A sword that glowed as bright as a blue diamond, but it wasn't the Lux. Pluck held the hilt of the Lux as if she was shaking hands with a friend she hadn't seen in a very long time. She felt ashamed she let Gamemnon's trickery beguile her into thinking the sword threw her away and chose another. Pluck realized the Lux would never do that to her. The Lightning Sword had chosen her, and he would never abandon her. "Forgive me," she begged the sword. "I doubted you when you did nothing wrong." The sheath in her left hand stretched out its leather with great care and reshaped itself and wrapped itself around her left arm and formed a leather gauntlet. It covered her arm and hand all the way from her elbow, over the back of her hand, and to her knuckles. Pluck nearly wept as her friend spoke to her without words. There was no need for her to ask forgiveness, there was nothing that she had done that needed to be forgiven. The lettering that was once on the sheath was now engraved in the black leather gauntlet. It flashed and the words had changed slightly. The sheath was apart from the sword, and it was the Lux, the Lightning Shield. "Shield..?" Pluck spoke, and steel the same color as her sword extended up and out from the leather gauntlet, creating a round steel shield about ten hands end from end. The shield was very light, and Pluck questioned the Lux, "Is this also you?" "Yes, I can be many things in many times," the sword replied in a soothing deep male voice. "Don't you mean at many times?" she questioned. "No, I mean in many times," the Lux replied. "Let me show you." The sword caused a vision to fall upon her, and Pluck was whisked away to a world, not of Terra. The Lux had been apart of this world, but Pluck wasn't sure if it was before her or if it was after her. It was almost like time didn't matter when considering where and when. Pluck discovered that the Lux had another name as the vision pulled her deeper in. It was also known as the Sword of Cross-Worlds. She floated about a clear sky above a white stone structure that stood on a mountain overlooking a large valley with large towns and vast farmlands. The white stone structure flowed throughout the mountain it was built upon like dozens of starfishes connected by many open-air passageways. More of the structure laid within the mountain, but much of it also stood on top of it. Pluck noticed a being that looked like one of Man, but the being was taller and had pointed ears. *Elf*, she heard the Lux speak within her mind. The elf soldier wore gold armor and patrolled the white structure with many other elves. Pluck floated down and alighted on one of the open-air passageways. She peered around at the stone structure built within a mountain and then followed after the elf soldier as he continued his march through the passageway. Pluck believed she was in a dream and didn't fear running into the elf soldier or the other elf soldiers that passed her later. She followed the passage, and it came upon a large castle-like structure. Pluck started towards it when the Lux urged her to walk the other way to where two large wooden doors laid. She did, and on each of the massive doors a willow had been carved into the wood and painted gold. "Where am I?" Pluck questioned. "This is the Towering

Mountain Citadel," the Lux answered her. Pluck noticed someone who wasn't an elf. She was a Woman in strange garment who didn't notice her. "Who is that?" Pluck asked the Lux. "She is Jane, and she has been sent to help a place known as AaBack's Grimm." "I don't think I understand." The Lux told her, "AaBack is a village in the world known as Grimm. Terra is this world, and Grimm is that world." "I think I understand," Pluck answered. Jane passed her, and Pluck noticed a black tattoo of a swan on her right cheek that hadn't been there before. Pluck looked to her own tattoo on her left hand, and she got a sense that Jane's tattoo marked her as the four ringed tattoos on her index finger marked herself. The swan tattoo vanished from Jane's face as she hurried on and went through one of the large wooden doors. "Jane is like me," Pluck proclaimed. "In a way, she is," the Lux replied. "Follow Jane," the sword urged Pluck. "There is another I want you to see." Pluck followed Jane and entered a large circular open-air structure with a dome above it supported by many large columns. The end opposite of her looked over a cliff and had a wide view of the valley below. Pluck noticed two people stood in the middle of the huge domed balcony other than the Woman. One a female elf wearing a crown and a beautiful gown of emerald and a Man who wore elf armor like one of the soldiers but of a silver color. The female elf had her back to the Man, Jane, and herself. The Lux informed Pluck that the female elf was Queen Glendriella. The female elf and the Man were talking, but then the Man's image faded as if existence had moved on many many seasons and left him behind. Jane and the female elf were in this future existence but something was wrong with this existence. Pluck saw them one moment and then the next, the roar of fire drowned out all other noise around her, and smoke filled her lungs and obscured her view. The black smoke was thick as fog, and she got down on her hands and knees, trying to find air to breathe. Pluck thought she was going to die as she looked for a place to escape the suffocating smoke, but then a wind swept in and blew most of it away. She rose to her bare feet as she coughed and her eyes watered. She glanced around now that she was able to see, and Pluck saw something so dreadful. She stood in another open air building that had been ravaged by a great battle and many bodies littered the floor, staining it green like the color of bleeding leaves. She wasn't sure where she was or when this existence occurred compared to the existence she just left. Pluck noticed someone standing at the domed balcony's wall looking over into the valley. She started toward this person when Pluck realized that she hadn't been transported away from the Towering Mountain Citadel; she had been transported through existence as she had been in the encampment when the darkness killed her, but instead of backwards, she had been flung forward through existence. Pluck glanced around herself as she walked to the person on the balcony. The bodies of elf soldiers along with elves, both male and female, wearing courtly garbs lay all around. She noticed that they all possessed a look about them as if they all had died in some terrible manner that caused them to scream, and that terrifying look entombed their faces forever. It was as if someone or something had reached deep down inside them and stole their life force from them. Pluck looked to the one person who might have answers for her, and they still had their back to her, so she walked toward them. When she was about halfway to them, she realized it was Queen Glendriella, and she quickly moved to her. Queen Glendriella didn't seem to notice her approach and had a distant look about her as she held onto the domed balcony's wall with one hand and gripped something else in her other hand close to her chest. Pluck moved closer and saw that the queen held a hand-and-a-half sword close to her bosom. Pluck instantly recognized the sword as the Lux. She immediately looked to her hand to see if she still had the sword, and she still held tightly to her

own Lux. Pluck started to speak to Queen Glendriella but in an instant, she found she was standing back in Gamemnon's tent. She saw Votar and asked him, "Have I been gone?" "I'm not sure I understand your question," he told her. "I was at another place, but maybe I went there only in my mind," Pluck said, and then she spoke to her sword, "Why did you show me this Queen Glendriella and Jane?" "They are a few I have helped as I am helping you by lending you my power. Maybe one day you will meet these females in person." "I'm not sure what you are talking about," Kabal spoke up as she moved over to the Beast Woman and said, "But I would like to ask you of another matter. I thought Tabitha had the Lux. Did she leave it behind?" "She never had the Lux. The sword she possesses is another." "A fake," Kabal uttered. "It might not be the Lux, but I sensed the sword is powerful, so I can't say that it's a fake," Pluck replied. "I would like to back up the conversation a bit," Votar spoke. "When I entered the tent and heard you speaking of abandonment and friendship, were you speaking to the Lux?" "I was," Pluck replied. "I didn't know anyone else was in the tent with me at the time." "My confession of love..." he started. "It was..." Pluck walked over to him, leaned up to him, and kissed him on the cheek, and then she said, "Your heart has finally spoken to me. Does it matter how it was coaxed from you?" "I guess it doesn't matter," he replied, and then he started, "We should..." Kabal interrupted him, "We should leave. You can talk of swords and matters of the heart once we are safely on a DraKa and far away from this place." "I can't go," Pluck said. "I promised my mistress..." "You don't intend to serve Tabitha as her servitor, do you?" Kabal questioned her. "I did take the oath," Pluck replied as she showed them the brand. "I also have the Lux back. I need to go out there and slow down the approaching darkness." Kabal glanced at Votar, and then she told Pluck, "You died the last time you faced the darkness. Are you confident you won't die again?" Pluck didn't answer her. Votar grabbed hold of Pluck's shoulders and said, "You don't believe you can win. You want to go out there and face the darkness when you have already lost the battle in your mind." "I only want to save more lives," she told him. "There's not that much time left. I need to go out there." "No. I told you that I love you. I've finally decided you mean so much to me. I can't let you go out there to only meet your death." She put a hand to his cheek and told him, "You mean so much to me also, but I have a duty I must perform. I am a High Guard and the Serviatrix, even if I am the false one. My mistress also gave me an order. I will save as many as I can, so you must go." Pluck glanced at Kabal and repeated, "You both must go." Votar was about to argue with her some more, so she told him, "I have the Lux now. I won't die as I did the last time." Pluck didn't allow him to say anymore and left Gamemnon's tent still holding the Lux. Kabal walked over to her brother before he rushed after the Beast Woman, and she questioned him, "Are you sure you want to do this? Are you sure Pluck is the one you want to give your heart to? Many won't accept her." GuideMa entered the tent as if looking for someone as the Duchess questioned her brother. She stood off to the side and waited for an opportunity to speak as the siblings continued their conversation. "Does that include you?" Votar asked his sister. "You wanted her to die, not that long ago, and since she couldn't be sentenced to death because of the split vote, you wanted her punished and shamed." "If you know all of this, why are you asking me the question?" "You seem different around her," Votar replied and then motioned to the Globe Spore floating just above her shoulder and to the male Calico she held tenderly in her palm while stroking his head with her finger, and then he said, "Your attitude towards her has changed. I only want to know if you hate her more or..." "Or I hate her less?" Kabal glanced at her two new small friends and answered, "I don't know. I thought of Pluck as someone conniving and shrewd, but since I was

forced to spend some time with her, I see... I don't know what I see." "You should decide your feelings towards her before you criticize mine," he told her, and then Votar left and went after Pluck. GuideMa glanced in the direction of the tent flap, then she walked over to the Duchess, and said, "I did something that might not have been very wise of me to do." Kabal was in deep thought, considering her brother's words and had turned her gaze to the Winsome Kit. The Femor's question brought her out of her contemplating, and she questioned, "What did you do?" GuideMa thought the Duchess' malice towards the vile Woman was as her own, but GuideMa changed her mind after hearing her conversation with her brother. GuideMa also considered the time the three of them spent together after the earth swallowed them up, and because of all of that, she considered she might have lost an ally. GuideMa carefully scrutinized her reaction as she told her, "There was more to the servir rite than what was put on display on the platform. Tabitha gave Pluck a new name." "What do I care if that female gave the Woman a new name?" Kabal snapped. She hated what her brother had suggested and was irritated that he might be right, but then she considered the Femor's hatred of the Woman, and she was curious as to why she even brought up the subject, so she inquired, "What name did she give her?" "Tabitha couldn't come up with one so I suggested one. I don't know why I did it, why I even bothered to chime in, but I suggested the name and Tabitha liked it." "Are you going to tell me the name or is this some sort of game?" "I told her, Alba." "But that's..." Kabal uttered. "You shouldn't have used that name! I should have never uttered that name! You should have..." She realized how hysterical she sounded, not because she was angry but concerned for Pluck, and as that realization sunk in, Kabal nearly collapsed into a chair as she exclaimed, "My brother was right. I've lost my hatred of the Woman." GuideMa accused her, "It sounds to me more like you consider her a friend." "Don't be ridiculous," Kabal retorted. "I only said that I don't hate her anymore." GuideMa watched the Duchess as she sat in the chair cradling the Winsome Kit, and then she said, "You told Pluck that Alba wasn't a name. You told her it was more of a curse and that it meant one who was hated and despised by all. You never told Pluck any different. I told Gamemnon and Tabitha the meaning you gave, and Gamemnon was pleased that the Woman would receive such a name. Tabitha didn't seem to worry about its meaning, she only thought the name was pretty." She paused, and then she said, "Alba is the name of a rare rose that is believed to have gone extinct." "You told me this the last time," Kabal spoke, and then she questioned, "If you knew that I lied about what Alba means, why did you suggest such a name?" "I don't know, and the fact of it frightens me," GuideMa admitted as she placed her two right hands to her chest. "My perceptions of my Duke, of Tabitha, and of the vile Woman are changing. I don't like that I had a part in her new name or how my hatred towards the Woman is being rewritten. I need to know..." She bent to one knee so she could look into the Duchess' face while Kabal sat, and then GuideMa questioned her, "I know there's a deeper meaning to the name. You know something you haven't spoken. I need for you to tell me why you called the vile Woman, Alba." Kabal wanted to share, she wanted to tell someone of the vision she had of the younger Pluck, but she couldn't trust this Femor. GuideMa was loyal only to Gamemnon. "You must tell me," she persisted when the Duchess remained silent. "I have to know. I must know." "How can I trust you with something like this?" Kabal questioned her. "You may use it against Pluck. You are also loyal only to..." "That vile Woman saved my life!" GuideMa yelled as she stood and backed away from her. "She saved my life when I only wanted to destroy hers! I also did something down in the underground temple that neither of you two know. I will tell you if you

will tell me." "You sound desperate," Kabal accused her. "I am. I need to get rid of this confusion that persists around me when I consider how I should feel towards that vile Woman, so tell me." "Fine, but I ask that you tell no one else," Kabal spoke, and then she said, "I had a dream or more like a vision when we were within the Gargantuan Worm. I saw Pluck when she was but a child. The name she had back then was Alba. The name was taken from her and she was so young, I believe she has forgotten it." "Her name..? Her real name?" GuideMa repeated as she considered if it had any significance. Kabal demanded, "Tell me what you did in the underground temple that I don't know about." "The Giant Lunar Flytrap died, and I took a seed that fell from its carcass," GuideMa admitted. "I planted the seed outside of the encampment." "Why would you do a thing like that?" Kabal questioned. "I don't know," GuideMa replied, and then she admitted, "I feel as though some force is directing my hand. I feel as if I have lost control of my own will, and I believe that vile Woman has something to do with it. My Duke wants Pluck dead so she should be dead by now, but she keeps defying the odds." Kabal saw how bothered she was, so she asked her, "You are a loyal servant and you have had ample chances, why haven't you fulfilled his wishes?" GuideMa remained silent on the issue as she considered the question. "You don't know," Kabal answered for her. "We must both be on the same path of confusion." GuideMa still remained silent, so Kabal asked her, "If I'm the only one whose feelings have been changed by the Woman, why did you suggest a name that's so endearing as to mean a rose?" "I don't know. I told you I don't know, but I will find out," GuideMa spoke, and then she stormed out.

Earlier outside of Gamemnon's tent...

Pluck left the tent, knowing Votar would only try to stop her from going through with her mission. She didn't want to argue with him, and she was afraid he might change her mind, so she decided to think of other things. "I must ask you a question," she spoke to the sword. "How do I sheathe you now that your scabbard is a gauntlet?" The Lux replied, "On the gauntlet by your wrist there is an opening. Place the tip of my blade there and sheathe me as if the gauntlet was longer. Space inside my scabbard can be manipulated so that there is plenty of room within." "I don't believe I understand what you're talking about, but I will do as you say," Pluck spoke, and then she sheathed the Lux within the gauntlet. The blade entered a different pocket of space as he entered his reformed scabbard. Pluck was amazed by this magic as she peered within the small opening that looked as if a universe existed within, and when she released the hilt, the guard wrapped around her wrist like a loose bracelet and the handle bent forward and ran along the gauntlet as another layer of protection. "Does this hurt you to contort so?" she questioned the Lux as she paused some distance from the tent. "I don't feel pain in that way," he told her. "I won't make for a very good sword if my body felt pain for I would be in it constantly if I was used a lot." "I think I understand," she said. "It's just you look so uncomfortable in this new form." "This form allows me to be closer to you and protect you in ways I was unable to before," the Lux explained. "Our bond has progressed, and I'm very pleased." She stroked her hand over the gauntlet and handle as she continued to walk and said, "Our friendship has grown stronger. I no longer see you just as a weapon" Votar rushed out of the tent after Pluck, but Pluck was met by Fairah before he had a chance to retake their conversation. Pluck saw her adopted mother and rushed over to her and hugged her. Fairah hugged her back as Zenba flew up to the Beast Woman's face and wrapped her four translucent jade arms around her cheek. Pluck lifted her

right hand and touched Zenba's back, returning her affection. The female Calico Winsome Kit was with them and meowed and purred. "I'm so glad all of you are fine," Pluck said. "I never knew what happened to all of you in the other existence." "None of us were hurt in the other existence," Healen, the Velum doctor replied. "You on the other hand..." Zung nudged the Velum, and he spoke no more on the matter. "We need leave," Quip spoke up. "Evil scent carried on wind." "Yes, you all need to leave," Pluck spoke. "You need to..." Something seemed to trouble Fairah, so Pluck pulled from her embrace so she could peer into her dear one's face, and she inquired of her, "What's wrong?" "My actions from earlier," Fairah started. "When I saw that they had killed ye, an uncontrollable fury took over, and I slaughtered many out of rage." "I don't understand," Pluck said. "The evil was attacking and you were only defending..." "I was defending no one," Fairah replied. "I was taking revenge for what they had done to ye." Pluck thought she had died alone, that none of her friends were near, and she had been thankful for that, but now that she learned that Fairah and perhaps all of them had seen... a dread crept upon her heart. Fairah continued, "I did not realize the effect ye's death would have on me. With the great power the Creator has bestowed upon me, I must always be vigilant of my emotions as they dictate my actions. The moment I saw ye dead, I lost myself to my rage." Fairah glanced at JuJu as he left the supply tent where he had been asleep, and she stated, "If another had not stepped in, I fear I may have even slaughtered innocence to destroy those who were responsible for ye's death." "I never realized when I first spoke to the Mystic Rose," Pluck said. "The Mystic Rose told me I could save many but not by her power or my power." "She does know of the abilities of the Immortals. As long as there is more than one of us, we can manipulate short periods of existence," Fairah said. "We cannot use it very often. I do not like that she placed ye on a path where ye's death would force my hand. I lost myself to grief and anger... I almost..." "We all have lost ourselves to grief and/or anger. What is important is..." Pluck paused, and then she said, "I'm not sure what is important. Usually, you're the one giving me motherly advice. What would you tell me if our situations were reversed?" "What would I tell ye?" Fairah repeated. "I would say... I would say learn from ye's mistakes and guard ye's self from ever doing them again." Kabal came out and joined them. The male Calico Winsome Kit left her side and met his twin sister, and they danced about the air. Votar finally spoke to Pluck, "Tell Fairah and your friends what you plan to do. Tell them what you plan to do after your life was given back to you." "Are you marching to face the Cursed and Shadow before they come here?" Fairah questioned her. "I am." "I see you have the Lux," Fairah said. "I do not remember you having the blade in the other existence." "The Lux is once again by my side," Pluck told her as she lifted her left arm and showed everyone the reformed sword. "He has made himself smaller so he is easier to carry around." Zung spoke up as he motioned to her right hand, "Something else is different about Pluck." Zenba added, "It some sort of burn mark." "I have become Tabitha's servitor," Pluck told them, not sure how they would take the news. "This brand is part of that rite. I also told everyone within the Valley of Blood that I am the false Serviatrix." "Why did you do this?" Zenba questioned her. "Why would you lie to the people?" "I don't know that it's a lie," Pluck replied. "I could be the false one, but what's more important is that I did this so Tabitha would tell the people to flee and already half of them have left the encampment. I just need to acquire more time for them." Fairah took her hand and said, "I don't like that you must go. I should go with you." "I think it's more important that you assist those who are still preparing to flee. Your Maag-lee could assist them greatly." "What do you think?" Fairah questioned. Pluck wasn't sure who she was speaking to,

but then the Mystic Rose lifted from her back. "She needs to go where her heart leads her," the flower replied. "The heart can be a troubling thing," Fairah spoke. "It can lead one astray." "It can, but I believe Pluck's heart is correct on this matter, you must allow..." The Mystic Rose lifted higher so everyone could see, and then she spoke, "All of you must allow Pluck to do this and to do this alone. Many still need your help here as they prepare to leave." "I can't let you do that," Votar spoke up, and he moved through those gathered around Pluck. "I can't lose you." Pluck took both of his hands and told him, "I was brought back from death as many were... I need to make sure that they stay alive, and I feel I must go out there alone to do so. I need to go now. Prepare your own escape." "You go to your death!" he yelled. "I don't plan on dying. I will do everything in my power to come back." "You must come back to me," Votar told her. "You must."

* * *

Far from Wellspring...

Virago and Flaxen's cabin aboard the Seahorn...

The Empress sat on her bunk as Adroit used a quill and inkwell to draw scribbles on parchment. They had no toys for the girl to play with so Virago thought she'd occupy the girl's time with reading her stories and allowing her to draw. Lady Flaxen had gone with Brio to walk the upper decks for some fresh air. Virago rose from her bunk and went and stood behind the girl as she drew what looked like the people of the Isle of Kismet. She stroked her hand down the girl's long blonde strands." "Your hair is so pretty and the color of flaxen like my friend's." Adroit paused from her drawings and said, "Explain pretty." "Have you ever seen a butterfly?" Virago questioned her. "Yes, many. I have tried to catch them, and once I did, but they taste..." "Tell me," Virago interrupted. "When you see them fluttering in the air, what do you think?" The little girl thought on the Empress' inquiry, and then in her mind, she placed herself in the valley where she saw hundreds of them. "I think I want to be one," Adroit replied. "I want to fly as they do, and I want to look as they do. I tried back then, but I could never fly." "Pretty is something like that," Virago stated. "I think you are pretty. You and your hair." Adroit turned in her chair and peered at Virago, and then she got this sad look on her face and said, "You only see the butterfly." "Yes, I see a butterfly in you," Virago replied as she stroke her hand down her hair again. "Shall you let me brush your hair." "Would this please you to do so?" "It would," Virago answered her. Adroit nodded, and Virago went and retrieved her own brush. "My mother used to brush my hair just like this," Virago told her. "Mother... that would make you her daughter," Adroit said. "That is right. Can you tell me about your mother?" "She's dead," the little girl said without a hint of emotion. "I'm alone." Adroit set the quill down and admitted in nearly a whisper, "I'm afraid. I've always been afraid." "You must have seen some horrible things on the island." She nodded her head and said, "Many died. Many were screaming." "There's nothing to be afraid of now," Virago told her. "I'm afraid someone will hurt me," Adroit told her. "I have no one to protect me. I have to protect myself." "You have me," Virago told her. "You have me and Flaxen to protect you." Adroit turned around and questioned her, "What if you two are the ones I'm afraid of? You will hurt me. Soon you will hurt me." "No, I would never hurt you," Virago told her as she wrapped her arms around her and hugged her. "I promise."

Later that evening in Edward's cabin...

"I need some advice," Virago spoke to her husband. "It has to do with someone I have become fond of." "Do I have a rival for your heart?" Edward questioned her. "Nothing like that," she replied and smiled for his teasing. "What advice do you seek?" "This person is very afraid. She even said she is afraid of myself and Lady Flaxen. She must have seen horrors on the Isle of Kismet," Virago stated, and then she asked, "What could I do for such a person to ease her fears?" Edward thought about it, and then he said, "She needs a foundation." "I do not think I follow," Virago spoke. "This person has lost everything so she is standing on sand that can be easily swept away by any tide of uncertainty. If she had something that was a solid foundation and come to believe the tide would not wash away the ground beneath her, her fears may lessen." "I think I understand what you are trying to tell me, and I shall consider your idea," Virago stated, and then she asked, "What of the assassin? Have Fracas or Vim discovered any more signs of one being aboard? And what of the missing sailor?" "Nothing new was discovered this sun's cycle. I am beginning to think there was never an assassin or it fled the ship before we sailed too far away from the Isle of Kismet," Edward replied, and then he declared, "I shall not let us drop our guard though. Your safety and all on board must be maintained."

Chapter Five

A Witness To The End

Pluck left the encampment and started across the Crimson Grassland and journeyed for five mites before another joined her. Pluck glanced at GuideMa and inquired of her, "Why are you here and not with your Duke?" "I have come to be a witness to your end," she replied. "I was to be a witness before in the other existence, and I'm to be a witness again." "You should go back," Pluck told her. "Witness or not, I don't believe the darkness will care who they kill." "You can't order me around as you did my Duke and the one who has become your mistress. I obey only my Duke and my own conscience." "I know," Pluck told her. "I thought I might try and save your life." They walked on in silence as Pluck considered how she would stop an army so large. She had gained a new relationship with her sword but had yet to wield the Lux's true power. A half nal went by, then they came upon a lone male Necrom who seemed to be waiting for them in a clearing among the Crimson Grass. There was a familiar presence about him, but Pluck didn't recognize him. He had long black hair and golden fur. He held a sheathed long dagger in one hand, and his ebony long flowing robe seemed to float about him as if it was alive. "Who are you?" Pluck called out to him as she stopped some distance from him. He grinned at seeing her as if he expected her, and then he retorted, "Don't you mean who are we?" A male Velum, a male KellyZing, a female Femor, and a male Dreadgon walked into view and surrounded them on all sides. Pluck noticed something peculiar about the other four immediately. Their skin or shell complexion seemed pale as if they were sick, and their clothing was tattered as much as their appearance seemed to be unkept. Pluck turned back to the male Necrom and questioned him, "Who are all of you?" "I like to refer to us as the Children of the Forgotten, but the others like to

refer to us as our ancestors were," the male Necrom replied. "We are all of the Shadow Races. We had invaded the encampment and nearly killed all of you, but powerful Maag-Ilee flung us back through existence. Many wanted to hurriedly storm back into the encampment and have the pleasure of killing all of you again, but I convinced them it might not be that wise. I brought this small scouting party with me to see if we can ascertain who among you could be so powerful," he answered as he looked Pluck and GuideMa over, and then he stated, "I know it is neither of you, though one of you does possess powerful Maag-Ilee, but the Maag-Ilee does not originate from you." "Two different Maag-Ilee sources," the female Shadow Femor spoke up. The male Shadow Necrom focused on Pluck, and then he said, "I sense the other now. Tell me who among the encampment disturbed existence?" GuideMa stated, "Shouldn't you introduce yourselves before you start asking questions?" "I can do that," the male Shadow Necrom said. "I am Malus. Loathen is the Shadow Velum. Zephen is the Shadow KellyZing. Mar is the Shadow Dreadgon. The last of our party is Abhora the Shadow Femor that has been ogling my body since we started this mission." "I have to admit I have wanted a taste since we met," Abhora told him. Malus ignored her comment and continued, "Why have you come out here? Did you flee in the wrong direction?" Pluck declared, "I came out here to prevent the darkness... to delay you from going into the encampment." "You changed your boast to a... What is the word I'm looking for? No matter. You changed your declaration to delay not destroy or prevent," Malus stated. "You spoke in truth for I doubt you could kill one of us here and there is no way you can stop the army three hundred thousand strong that waits behind me." He thought about it some more, and then he said, "You have already accomplished your goal. You have already delayed us for more than twenty mites now. Sixteen for the mites I decided to wait for you here when I saw you in the distance running this way, and the four more for which we have been talking in. You have accomplished your goals, and now I must know your names." "I am Pluck," she replied as she glanced at the one beside her, and then she said, "This is GuideMa and she has come to be a witness to..." GuideMa interrupted her, "I have come to be a witness to the end of the false Serviatrix." Pluck turned to her and whispered, "I was wanting to keep the idea of the Serviatrix out of this." "I told you before," GuideMa began. "I don't take orders from you, spoken or unspoken." The five Shadow Beings started to murmur amongst themselves as if they could speak to each other in a normal volume and be heard around their large circle by all. "You all seem a little surprised," Pluck said. "As my companion stated, I am only the false one, not the real..." Abhora interrupted her as she raised all four of her arms to the heavens and proclaimed, "Heed this warning and this promise. Man will be the twilight that breaks before the return of those cursed. Those who claim to be the Serviatrix shall spring up threefold, but only one will claim to be false. Beware and take care of this False One, she shall...." "Silence!" Malus ordered, and the Shadow Femor immediately fell quiet. Malus said, "Femors do like to speak when they should be silent whether Shadow or..." he spoke as he glanced at GuideMa and said, "...other. Speak no more of our prophecies to outsiders." Abhora dropped her hand and nodded her understanding. "Now..." Malus began again. "What were we talking about before?" "I and the one with me introduced ourselves," Pluck replied, then placed her right hand on her chest, and said, "I said I was..." Malus marched over to Pluck with this furious resolve that it caused her to stop speaking midsentence. She didn't know if she should draw her sword or run. Pluck knew she didn't stand much of a chance against them, but she knew that from the start. She started to back up from him as GuideMa contemplated if she would act if the Shadow Necrom

attacked Pluck. Malus overtook Pluck, grabbed her right hand, and examined the mark he had spotted that caused him to thunder towards her. Abhora moved a few steps towards them as she questioned him, "What do you see?" "I see something that wasn't there before. I see a wondrous and peculiar thing." Malus looked to the Shadow Velum as he held up Pluck's right hand, and then he questioned him, "What do you think, Loathen?" Malus squeezed her wrist as he asked, "Do we skin her here or take her back to camp with us?" The Shadow Velum replied, "I think we should take her back to camp with us, but I don't think Abhora's male plaything will like that we haven't killed her. Lord Caliber did say the one he reviles was named Pluck." "He did," Malus spoke. "I think we can let Abhora worry about this Lord Caliber. I wish to have a plaything of my own." Pluck took a step back from him as she wrenched her wrist free from his grasp, and she declared, "I'm going nowhere with you. I came to..." "Fight us?" Malus interrupted her. "You came to delay us by fighting an entire army. You have no such strength. I could draw my blade and end you here before you could even gasp." Her heart thundered in her chest as fear incited her to react, so she moved her hand to draw her sword. Pluck paused from drawing the Lux and took a few more steps back as she looked around at all the other Shadow peoples. She had a feeling her life would be at an end once she drew her sword, but if she could continue engaging them in conversation, she could delay them even longer from entering the encampment. "True," Pluck spoke as she moved her hand away from the Lux sheathed on her left forearm. "I have no such strength. I couldn't even save one life in the previous existence." "You fought like a Fire Lioness protecting her cubs in your attempt," Malus told her. "You were there?" she questioned him. "We were all there," Malus answered. "She continues to delay us," Abhora spoke up, and then she said, "I say we do what we want to her and her companion and then finish our mission." Loathen asked, "What sort of death should she have?" Malus looked Pluck over and said, "Yes, what sort of death should you have? You came here to die, but I believe you only came here to die if you could do so in some glorious way. I bet you would not willingly kneel before me and let me take your head." "Why would I even do such a thing?" Pluck questioned him. "I can delay you no longer if I surrender." "Surrender, yes, that is what you would be doing," Malus spoke, and then he said to her, "I want you to surrender to me." "I'll never surrender!" Pluck declared. "Are you afraid to die in such a mundane way? You seem willing to die to save those you hold in importance, but would you do so in a manner that is weak and cowardly?" "I don't understand what you are asking me," Pluck stated. "What if you could save those in the encampment by completely surrendering your life to me? We will wait before sending our forces into the Valley of Blood if you will surrender to me and let me take your life without resistance." "I could surrender to you and you would delay attacking those in the encampment?" Pluck inquired as she turned and looked in the direction where all her friends were. She turned back to Malus and questioned him, "Why would you do such a thing? I thought you came here to destroy..." "We came to please our bloodlust," he told her. "But we can appease it another time. I'm more curious to see if you'll accept my offer and accept such an unglorified death. Agree and I'll delay a nal." The Shadow peoples slowly closed in their circle around Pluck and GuideMa. "You hesitate," Malus spoke. "You truly don't want to die, do you?" "I want to live," she admitted. "I came out here to fight, believing there was a very small chance I could survive, so yes, I don't want to die." Malus moved towards her a few steps and said, "I'll make it very simple for you." He pointed away from the encampment and the Shadow army behind himself and said, "Head in that direction away from those you swore to protect and those who would take the lives of those

you find of importance, and you can live." "I don't want to die again," she spoke. "I don't want to feel the life flow out of myself as my blood had flowed out. I want to live. I want to continue to experience the world around me. I want..." "Know yourself," he told her. "It's the first step. Know yourself and then you can truly be. You should only hold yourself in importance." "I want to live, but I want the others to live more," Pluck told him. "Don't lie to yourself. You fear death." "I do," she admitted, "But I fear a world where the others die, I fear it more." Pluck glanced back at the encampment, and then she turned back and said, "How can I trust you will do as you say?" "You can't," Malus replied. "I want six nals," she told him. "I can give you six," Malus replied. Abhora spoke up, "You can't. You don't have the authority..." "You challenge my authority!" Malus roared at the Shadow Femor. Abhora cringed from him. He turned his attention back to Pluck and said, "I'll give the encampment six nals to leave." "I want something else," Pluck said. "We all want many things," he told her as he peered at her with these intense dark blue eyes that seemed to stare right into her soul. "Our desires make us who and what we are. Let me hear yours. Let me hear who you are." "Let me return to the encampment and then when the six nals have gone by, I will come back and surrender to you," Pluck replied. "It'll take time to return to the encampment and I also want to say my goodbyes and make sure everyone is safe." Malus questioned her, "How can we trust that you will do as you say?" Pluck replied, "You just can." "Your manner of speak isn't enough," he told her. "I want more. I want you to take an oath. Swear to me! Swear you will give me your life for those in the encampment! Swear by something that is important to you." She put a hand over her heart and pledged, "I swear as a High Guard, I will return to you and surrender my life to you if you will hold off attacking those in the encampment for six nals. Spare my friends, and my life is yours." "I'm satisfied. Return now," Malus commanded her. "In six nals, you will come back to me, and I will deal with your death." She nodded, and then Pluck turned and GuideMa followed as she headed back through the Crimson Grass towards the encampment. Abhora questioned Malus as the two left, "Why did you let the False One leave?" "I want to see if she'll honor her word and..." he began as he motioned to the Shadow KellyZing with his head, and the Shadow KellyZing flew after the two. "I want to see who the False One had to return to. I must know what desire of hers made her return to the encampment one last time." Pluck walked away from the Shadow people, but after she had traveled about three mites, she started to run. GuideMa raced after her. "What are you going to do?" GuideMa questioned. "I'm going to do as I said I would do. I'll make sure everyone evacuates the encampment, and then I'll return to Malus to hand him my life," Pluck replied. "Do you think this final act will prove something?" GuideMa questioned her. "Do you believe by just dying you can become the true Serviatrix?" Pluck glanced at her, and then she questioned, "Do you really believe that's why I'm doing this? Do you believe I want to gain some sort of glory for myself to carry on with me into the afterlife?" "No," GuideMa replied. "I believe if you do go through with it, you're merely dying to save those you love. You don't seem like the type to go after glory or honor." They ran for some time, and then GuideMa said, "I have to know. Why did you never draw your weapon? You wanted to take back the Lux from Tabitha at all cost when you thought she had your sword. You wanted the sword's strength and yet you never used it." "I don't know myself," Pluck admitted. "I just had this feeling I could delay the scouting party longer if I never engaged them." "I believe the answer is, you were afraid to die." "Can't the answer be both?" Pluck questioned her. "I don't want to die and I want to save everyone." "You bother me," GuideMa told her. "You don't want to die and yet you have agreed to that

point. What are you going to tell the others? It will hurt all of them to know what you have planned." "Don't say such things," Pluck told her as she tried to hide the outcome even from herself. "You'll make me cry and I won't be able to go through with what I must do." "What must you do?" "I have to make sure they all leave, and that means I can't tell them of the deal I made," Pluck answered her, then she glanced at her as she said, "You concern me though. You witnessed the deal, so what about you? What will you do? Will you tell the others of my deal?" "I'll do as I please," GuideMa told her. "I always do as I please." They ran for another two mites, and then Pluck stated, "I guess I was wrong before. It would seem a witness has saved both of us for at least another six nals." GuideMa questioned her, "What do you mean?" "I had told you that you should go back. I had said witness or not, I didn't believe the darkness would care who they killed." Pluck chuckled before she said, "If you had not of gone with me, they would have killed me straight away. You might not have meant to, but you saved my life, our lives by saying I was the false Serviatrix. I still don't understand why they didn't kill us straight away, but I thank you. You might have just enabled me to save a lot of people." "We will see. You still have to surrender yourself, and I don't know if you will go through with it." About five mites later, they came upon Votar who had set after Pluck on one of his DraKas full of Shangra Guards. "You didn't keep your promise," Pluck yelled at him as the DraKa stopped beside her. "How could I?" Votar questioned her as he glanced around the area. "What of the darkness?" "The army has not come nor will they come for at least another nal. There is still time," Pluck replied, and then she asked, "Has everyone evacuated from the encampment?" "Nearly," Votar told her. "I would say that by the time we return, everyone should be gone." "Will you walk with me?" Pluck asked him as she looked up at the bright sky. "It's actually a very beautiful day. We can't make it a stroll, but we can walk briskly and keep one another company on our way back." Votar climbed down from the Howdah and joined her as GuideMa climbed into the Howdah and took his place. He walked beside Pluck, and she took his hand as they walked. "I can't believe how this sun's cycle has turned out," Pluck told him. "I died again, and you confessed your undeniable love for Man." Votar held her hand tenderly in his as he replied, "It's true that I made a confession, but I don't remember ever saying anything about loving Man." She leaned over and nudged his shoulder with her own, and then she said, "Sure you did. I'm a Woman and you said that you love me." "I guess we can leave it at that," Votar told her. "Tell me what it would be like to be your wife." Her actions and questions surprised him, but Votar said nothing of them and answered, "As my wife, you would have my full devotion. No matter the time of the sun's cycle, I would be yours," he replied as he lifted her hand and kissed it. "You would be first above all things. I will hold you tight every night and flirtatiously nibble on your ear as I..." "I mean," Pluck interrupted him. "What sort of responsibilities would a Duchess of Shangra have? I know that you are the Duke of Shangra, but I don't see that you do much on the Dukely side. All I have seen is that you like to travel a lot by DraKa, visit with old friends, flirt with females you hardly know, and confess your heart when the other is speaking to a sword." Pluck tried not to laugh as she thought of those memories she would forever cherish, and then she asked as she thought of an existence that could never be hers, "Would I as Duchess of Shangra have as much leisure time as you? Could I lie around and nap half the sun's cycle away as you seem to do?" "If that is all you want to do, then yes," Votar replied. "But you do know there's much more to ruling a dukedom." "I do," Pluck told him. They walked on, and Pluck didn't say another word the remainder of their trip. She held firmly his hand as she soaked in as much as she could of the life around her,

imagining a life she could have had. She knew what was coming and intended to keep it hidden from everyone else, but she wasn't sure if the witness, who was now seemingly asleep in the Howdah, would allow her such a blessing. They returned to the encampment just as a DraKa carrying the last of the civilians left the Valley of Blood. Fairah, Zung, Zenba, Kabal, Quip, Healen, and Staunch were still there as if they waited for Pluck's return. The Shadow KellyZing flew into the encampment and hid himself away to observe the False One. "You have returned," Zenba uttered. "I thought for sure I would never see you again. I can't tell you how happy I am that you've returned to us." "I also didn't know if I would return, and I'm also happy to have this time with all of you," Pluck told them, and then she considered she needed to be careful with her words. "People all gone," Quip spoke up. "We too need leave." He glanced at the Dreadgon youth and then Quip said, "Staunch want you know he glad you returned. I also very glad." Pluck nodded her thanks to the Dreadgon youth and the Trife, and then she said, "Quip is right. Let us check once more that everyone has left and then leave ourselves. I want to travel as fast as we can and get as far away from this place."

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Far from Wellspring...

Aboard the Seahorn...

Virago took Adroit on deck in a section no one worked and allowed her to play with some wooden toys some of the sailors had whittled for her. Adroit didn't like direct sunlight and always kept to the shadows. She sat in a shadow playing with a wooden horse and cow. Virago wanted to give this delightful child the foundation Edward had suggested, so after some time had passed, she went and sat beside the girl, put a hand to her tiny cheek, and said, "I love you." Adroit looked up at her, tilted her head, and said, "Love..? What is this word?" Virago put a hand to her mouth to stifle a shocked utterance, then she composed herself for the girl's sake, and then replied, "Love is an emotion. You understand fear." "And hate," Adroit chimed in. "Hate is taught early to children." Virago didn't know what to say, so she ignored the little girl's comment put a hand over her own heart, and said, "Love comes from here." "I understand. It's the emotion of importance," Adroit said as if she finally realized what love meant and that she had already understood the word just never knew its name. "I love you," Adroit said with a big smile on her face that brightened her countenance and Virago's own soul. "You are of great importance to me." "I want to do something for you, and I want to do something for me," Virago said. "Want is a desire," Adroit told her. "We are taught we should always fulfill our desires." "I believe what I wish to do shall also make you happy," Virago told her. "I shall make you my daughter. I am Empress. I can do such things." Adroit peered at her curiously, but she didn't say anything. "My daughter would be protected and no one could harm her, not without my permission," Virago explained to her, hoping to ease the child's fears. "That is how significant being an Empress is." "I would like that," Adroit admitted as if she shocked herself, and then she asked with a hint of sadness in her tone, "Are you asking the butterfly to be your daughter?" "Yes, I'm asking the pretty little girl before me to be my daughter." The child bowed her head and turned away from the Empress as she stated, "I don't think you want Adroit to be your daughter." "Sure I do," Virago told her as she knelt beside her, put both hands on her little cheeks, and gently turned her face so the child would look at her. "I would not have asked if I did not mean what I said." Adroit couldn't help but

bow her head while she held onto it, and then Adroit questioned her, "Do I have to answer you now? Can I think about it?" "There is no rush," Virago told her. "Let me tend to your wound. It is time to change your bandages." She removed the wrapping and under the light of the sun, Virago clearly saw that the child's blood which was reddish-purple was different from her own. She had dismissed the color difference for the poor lighting the lanterns gave off but now it was clear. Adroit was different from them somehow.

Later that evening in Edward's cabin...

"You have been very quiet," Edward told her. Virago looked up at hearing he spoke to her, but she had been so engulfed by her own thoughts, she never heard his statement. He repeated, "You have been very quiet." "I have had a lot on my mind." "Many things or one thing?" Edward inquired. "Adroit," Virago answered without going into details. "You talked about her last night." "I never spoke about Adroit," Virago said. "You did not have to. It was very easy to determine you spoke of her since there are very few she's on board. I also knew you spoke of her by the way I have seen you interact with the child. What troubles you?" "She is different from us," Virago said. "Adroit was raised on an island far away from any kingdom," Edward said. "The customs of the island may hold to none and make the child seem very foreign to us." "It is more than that," Virago said. "She..." Virago looked up and peered at her husband. She didn't believe now was the time to mention the child's unusual blood. Edward had enough to worry about. She would wait until she found out more if there was anything else to find out. She said, "Adroit is warming up to me and Lady Flaxen. I asked her an important question, and she decided to delay in answering me. I am going to speak to her about the matter again on the morrow, and if she agrees, there shall be something for us to discuss, my husband."

Chapter Six

Lunar Plants And Lies For Sake Of Lies

GuideMa left Votar's DraKa and Pluck's side before they re-entered the encampment, and she headed for the secluded hill outside the camp where Gamemnon had killed the merchant. GuideMa guessed that the merchant had sold the Duke the sword Tabitha now possessed along with some other items of secret. She made her way up to the hill, not sure why she had returned. GuideMa had planted the Giant Lunar Flytrap seed there, and as she arrived, she saw that the plant had grown to be as tall as her knees. The Lunar Flytrap turned its head to her as she approached. "Is there anything you want to tell me?" she questioned the plant. "You used me to bring you here, but you have done nothing but bear witness to my crime as an onlooker to murder and devour the poor merchant who was slain here. Can such a creature as you who benefited from murder be good or are you evil?" "I am as you," the young Giant Lunar Flytrap told her. "I am either good or evil." GuideMa thought about its words, and then she repeated her earlier question, "Is there anything you want to tell me?" "Listen once more to things that will be and have come about," the Lunar Flytrap said, and then it repeated, "Man shall reappear and then two Serviatrixes shall be revealed; one shall have her original tail and the other shall have a

tail made anew. They shall both claim the title and both claim doubt, but only one can have the sword that blazes like a blue fire diamond. A test shall be given... Possess the sword, possess the fame. Wield the sword, wield the right to shame. A time shall come when the earth shall call for one of the ones who doubts and when a name that is forgotten is uttered in concern, one of the Serviatrices shall discover a strong ally who is true and loyal. When a seed born out of death is planted by a triple moon upon a hill where blood was shed, hope shall rise and darkness shall fall. Many shall gather in the Valley of Blood, but numbers times six shall surround them. The shroud of darkness shall allow enemies who cling to the shadows to join forces with those who despise the light. They shall march, and where they tread, death follows. Only an act that brings on shame shall save them. The Daughter of a King shall seek out the darkness when something precious to her heart is stolen, and she shall find the darkness where the deformed Scarlet Wood reins. Another test shall be given, one that shall test the heart and soul and only the truth shall seize the sun's cycle." "So you say you're like me, that you're either good or evil. I thought my path had been decided the moment I followed my Duke." Some sort of anger kindled within her, and GuideMa snapped, "You have told me nothing, but I don't know what I expected or why I came back here. Enjoy your spot that was bathed in blood. I go to witness the folly of the False One." GuideMa turned and headed for the encampment. The Giant Lunar Flytrap watched her leave and then whined after her like some puppy. It lifted its roots out of the ground and used them as feet as it hurried after her.

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Far from Wellspring...

Virago and Flaxen's cabin aboard the Seahorn...

"Adroit," the Empress spoke up as she patted the area next to her on her bunk. "Come sit beside me." The small child climbed down from her chair at the table as Flaxen assisted her. The Lady lifted Adroit onto the bed, and then she went and sat by Virago as Flaxen went and sat in the chair the child had vacated. Virago put an arm around the child, and Adroit leaned on her as Virago started, "I want to talk to you about something we spoke about already." "The butterflies?" Adroit questioned. "No, what I want to speak to you about we talked about yesterday. I had asked you if you would like to be my daughter, and you said that you needed to think about it. Have you thought about it?" "I constantly think about it," Adroit replied. "I think about becoming your daughter, and I think about the butterflies." "Do you want to become my daughter?" "I do, and if I were a butterfly, I would without hesitation say yes," Adroit told her, then wrapped her arms around her own small frame, and then continued, "But I am no butterfly. I am a vile thing that eats butterflies." "I do not know what happened to you while you were on the Isle of Kismet," Virago began as she turned the child so she would look at her. She put a hand to Adroit's shoulder and told her, "But if you ever want to speak of them, speak of your life with your family, I shall listen." Virago leaned over and kissed the child on the cheek, and then she started, "Now about the butterflies..." Adroit put her hand to the pecked cheek as big tears streamed down her tiny face, and she spoke, "You should not see me with importance. I am no butterfly." Adroit started to sob as she whispered, "I am something that hides in the shadows. I am something that others should fear. I am something..." Virago felt the child's grief and loneliness, so she wrapped her arms around her and embraced the child as she told her, "You are

a butterfly. You might not see it, but I do. You are a butterfly and you can take flight and fly as they do. I speak of your thoughts and emotions. You do not need to hide in the shadows. You can come out into the light. There is nothing to be afraid of... I shall protect you. I promise." Adroit wrapped her little arms around her and wept as she spoke, "I do not want to be in the shadows. I want to be a butterfly. I want to be of importance to you. You and your Lady are of great importance to me. You have shown me things that I had little knowledge of. I want to be a butterfly. I want to come out into the light."

Later that evening in Edward's cabin...

Virago was as quiet as before except for the happy tune she hummed. "Did my idea work?" he questioned her. "What was that?" Virago inquired as she turned her attention to him. "I speak of Adroit," Edward began. "Is she less afraid? Have you given her a foundation to stand on?" "I am close to doing so," she replied. "I am so close to doing so I believe I can now speak to you about it." Edward said, "Go on..." "I want to make Adroit my daughter. In Morgog, I would not need my husband's consent to do so, but I wish for you to also be apart of her life if she agrees to become my daughter. Let me hear your thoughts on this." "A daughter..? Would she become a crown princess?" he questioned, speaking of the line of succession. "On her sixteenth birthday you could bestow such a title on her, but she would be more of a duchess when it comes to rank. Our children, we would have, would be in line before her. This adoption is to provide her with a home, and I would really like your support before I move forward." "I can tell you adore this child," he stated. "You shall have my support in whatever you do concerning this child." "Thank you," Virago stated. "Adroit has yet to consent herself, but I believe I am close to proving to the child my sincerity towards this endeavor. She already understands that I love her."

Below deck, the holy men's cabin...

Monk Sophis returned to their cabin and passed the High Priest as he left. "Did you retrieve my ring?" Priest Fallac questioned him after waiting a few moments. "No. Do you have any gold on you?" "A few coins. Are they needed?" "They shall be for show," the Monk replied. "Their gleam shall get me in close and then I can retrieve your ring." The Priest turned, raised his brown robes, removed a purse bag he'd hidden there, then turned, and said, "Make sure I get these back. They shall need to sustain us while we are in the wretched Fletching King- dom." The Monk took the coins Fallac handed him, and then Sophis said, "It shall be no problem, my Lord. I shall bring them all back once I have the ring."

* * *

The present on Wellspring...

The encampment was checked once more, and then everyone loaded onto one of four DraKas or walked beside one as most of the guards did, and the group headed out. For the first time in a long time, Pluck leaned back in the Howdah and relaxed. Votar had ordered food to be provided for all as it had been a long time since anyone ate. Pluck picked up a Jewel Apple and bit into it. "I didn't realize how tired and hungry I was. The last few sun's cycles for me have been none stop. It's so good just to sit back and think of nothing but filling my belly." "I have something else for you," Votar told her as he picked up a long wooden box. "It was given to me by a female

Necrom." "You're giving me gifts that other females have given you?" Pluck questioned him, acting hurt. "The female Necrom was elderly and the gift was given to me in thanks. I rendered assistance to her in evacuating when no one else would. The female told me she was a merchant and dealt in rare items." He opened the box, removed a white flower, and handed it to her as he said, "It is a rose and when I saw it, I immediately thought of you." Pluck stood, moved to the box, took the flower, placed it to her nose, and breathed in of its sweet smell, and then she said, "Thank you. It's very pretty." "The rose has a name. The merchant told me the name of the rose but I have forgotten it. I will have Nerva rediscover the name for me once we reach Shangra." "Where is Nirva? I haven't seen him in a while and he's not with our group." "Yesterday, I had him return to Shangra to do some research for me," Votar replied. "I received word back from him last night that he reached Shangra safely." "I'm glad he's safe," Pluck said as she moved to the edge of the Howdah and peered out at the Valley of Blood. Votar stood to his feet, walked up behind her, wrapped his arms around her, leaned to her, and said, "I will also have Nirva make preparations for our wedding." Sadness broke through her defenses and brought along with it the end she would meet later that sun's cycle. Pluck wanted to forget her promise, she wanted to tell Votar everything, and then they could run. She knew if she ran all she would guarantee was all their deaths, so she focused on the moment and her happiness returned, and then she turned and asked, "What sort of wedding will it be?" "The grandest of course," he replied. "All of Shangra will celebrate with us and you can pick any spot for the ceremony." She thought about the city and said, "I wish I could see the Aqua Falls again." "And you will as soon as we return," Votar told her. "And I'll make sure the place we are wed has a view of all of them." "I would like that," Pluck spoke as she turned her gaze to the horizon and noted the time of the sun's cycle. She let a few more mites go by, and then she said, "I'm going to leap over to the Howdah Zenba is in. I'd like to visit with her for a while." "Stay with me," he said. "There will be time enough to visit with your friends once we reach Shangra." "I believe you tell me a lie," Pluck spoke as she shook her finger at him as if scolding a young child. "I believe once we reach Shangra you will want me all to yourself." She moved to the edge of the Howdah, placed a hand on it, turned, and said, "I won't be gone too long." Pluck jumped out and landed among the Crimson Grass still holding the rose, and she stood there and waited by a shrub as Votar's DraKa moved on and Zung and Zenba's DraKa approached. A voice from deep inside the shrub spoke to her, "Do you think you can escape us?" Zephen didn't startle her. Pluck caught a glimpse of him earlier when the group set out to leave the encampment. "I'll keep my word," Pluck told the Shadow KellyZing as she kept her back to him so the others didn't know she was speaking to anyone. "I only wanted... I'll keep my word when the time comes. I know I can't escape." She put on a smile as the next DraKa walked up to her and she motioned that she wanted it to stop. The Aviatrix played her flute and the great beast stopped, and Pluck quickly climbed up the salamander-like creature till she reached the Howdah. Zung and Zenba were within. The two Calico Winsome Kit twins were fast asleep on the seats. Staunch and Quip also shared their Howdah, but the two of them were walking along the great beasts as they didn't like to stay still for too long. "I thought I might visit with you two," Pluck told them, then lifted the flower towards them, and asked, "Did you see what Votar gave me?" "It's so lovely," Zenba spoke as she flew over to acquire a better look at the flower. "It's a rose, but one I've never seen before." Zenba leaned in and the flower nearly engulfed her head as she took a whiff, and then she said, "The smell is so sweet. Could this flower symbolize something else?" "What do you mean?" Pluck asked her. "In the Necrom tradition, a

single flower is given to a female as a symbol of their engagement." "A symbol of our engagement," Pluck repeated as she looked to the rose. Pluck never realized she held a symbol of something that Votar and herself had only talked about. She only wanted to experience what it would be like to be his betrothed, but she had been selfish and it became all so clear to her. She felt guilty for the first time for what she had done to Votar by letting him believe they would be married and what she would do to him and the rest of her friends when she finally slipped quietly away. "Oh..." Pluck spoke as she stroked her finger down one of the white petals and she vowed to hold on to this flower for as long as she was able. She admitted, "I didn't know. I only thought..." She paused so she wouldn't cry, and then she continued, "I only thought it was a gift." "Hang on to that rose," Zenba told her. "It's good luck if you can keep the flower alive until the sun's cycle you are wed." "Did the flower truly give it away or had you already heard?" Pluck questioned her. "I already heard," Zenba fessed up. Pluck asked, "Is there anyone who doesn't know?" Zung chimed in, "His sister might not know, but then again, she might." "I'm such a horrible person," Pluck spoke. "Don't say such a thing," Zenba said. "Who cares what anyone else thinks? Votar loves you and that's what matters. He accepts you as a Woman." Pluck wanted to tell her what she had done. She wanted to tell Zenba she only pretended to accept Votar's proposal so that she could experience a world of joy and happiness before she had to return to the Shadow people and surrender her life to Malus. She knew her lie would hurt them, but she never realized how much it would hurt till she experienced the sorrow herself. She turned from the KellyZings and said, "I'm going to go visit with the others." She leapt down. "Pluck acted a little unusual," Zenba said. Zung suggested, "She might be a little bashful with talking of her marriage." "I don't know," Zenba said. "She seemed more frightened by something than bashful, and I thought I detected sadness where there should have been joy." Pluck waited on the next DraKa among the Crimson Grass. "I think I understand now," the Shadow KellyZing spoke to her as he hid among some of the tall red blades. "You were a little greedy when you requested six nals from Malus. You knew it wouldn't take that long to evacuate the encampment and you wanted to spend some time with those you find of importance." "Wouldn't you want this time to spend with the ones you care about if you were in my place?" Pluck questioned him. "We don't hold on to those of importance. We are the Shadow Races. We hold none as important only ourselves." "I'm sorry," Pluck told him. "Do not pity me," he told her. "Pity yourself. Soon your life will belong to us and we can decide what manner of death to gift to you." "Gift?" she questioned. "Yes, gift," Zephen repeated. "Death will seem like a gift once we are done with you." Pluck quickly moved to the next DraKa and boarded its Howdah. She found GuideMa within eating a cluster of Cobalt Grapes as she lay on a mound of pillows she'd gathered in the middle of the Howdah like some hilly nest. "Are you alone?" Pluck questioned. "Howdah hopping?" GuideMa inquired of her. "Yes, you could say that," Pluck replied as she sat down on the floor where she stood and leaned against the Howdah. "I can take a few mites and rest." "I guess it is exhausting playing this game with all of your friends," GuideMa told her. "You heard me then?" "My antenna can pick up sounds from great distances if I wish to do so." Pluck folded her legs up, leaned her head on her knees, and stared at her bare feet as she said, "I never intended to lie to them. It just happened and now... I don't want to tell them any different." She peered up and questioned her, "Am I cruel?" "Very," GuideMa answered, and then she popped a grape into her mouth. "You're a horrible friend." "I know," Pluck replied as she sat there sulking for a few mites, and then she asked, "Should I tell them? There's still time to make this right. I'm never

going to see them again. Should I tell them?" "What do I care what you do?" GuideMa replied. Pluck considered telling them, and she worked out the situation aloud as she said, "Many if not all would try to stop me from going and the Shadow will kill them. I made a promise to save them, so I must save them. I just wished I never lied to them. They're all so happy. What happens when I leave? Votar will search for me if I just disappear. I have less than two nals now. I don't know what to do." "You are a vile Woman," a female voice spoke up from the other side of the mount of pillows. "I am already upset with you for accepting my brother's proposal, and now that I hear you have lied to him, my brother will be very upset with you." "Kabal..?" Pluck uttered as she stood. She turned her attention to the Femor and inquired of her, "Why didn't you tell me we were not alone?" GuideMa sighed as she set down the Cobalt Grapes on a plate with other clusters, and then she answered, "One, I didn't know you would throw out a confession, and two, you forget that I care nothing for you nor do I need to keep any of your secrets." "I surprised you then?" Kabal questioned Pluck as she sat up from her sleeping spot. "You did," Pluck replied. "I didn't realize that both the lie-about would be in the same Howdah, but I should have guessed considering how you both like to lounge about in a Howdah." "I would argue the statement you just made but there's something more pressing," Kabal said as she rose to her feet, then went and sat on the seats in the back, and then she said, "Now tell me everything. Tell me everything or I'll..." "You don't have to threaten me," Pluck interrupted her. "I'll tell you." Pluck moved closer so that she could keep her voice low, then she sat on the floor before Kabal, and explained to the Duchess all that went on when she and GuideMa met the Shadow Races' scouting party. Pluck told her the pledge she had made to ensure everyone in the encampment had ample time to escape. "I see," Kabal spoke as she glanced at the white rose Pluck held, frowned, and then she said, "The lie you told my brother... You did this to hurt him?" "No," Pluck uttered as she stood to her feet. "I would never..." She caught herself before she finished, realizing she would hurt him. She told the lie and it would hurt him. Pluck sat back down, condemned by her own actions, and then she muttered, "I'm a horrible person." "We can all agree to that," Kabal spoke. "Now what are we going to do about you?" "I should just tell him," Pluck said. "I should just tell all of them." "What would that accomplish?" Kabal snapped at her, and then she lowered her voice and continued, "You would hurt my brother again, and he would do everything in his power to save your life. He and his guards wouldn't stand a chance and they would all die. Why did you have to come back here? Why didn't you stay away? You could have observed us from a distance. You could have made sure we all safely left without returning and seeding your atrocious and vicious lies!" Pluck bowed her head, put a hand to her face, and wept. She stopped herself after about a mite when she realized there wasn't time for such things, and then she stood and said, "I'll go immediately and tell Votar of my viciousness." "You have not been listening," Kabal yelled at her in a whisper, and then she questioned her, "What will that do now?" "It will hurt him, but no more than what I will do to him once I leave," Pluck replied as she walked toward the edge of the Howdah. "Existence can't be turned back again. I have to face what I've done." "Sit down!" Kabal ordered her as she herself stood. Pluck feared the Duchess' wrath and immediately did as ordered. Kabal marched over to her, pointed a finger at her as she leaned to her, and said in an angry whisper, "Now listen to me, you vile Woman! You will return to my brother and say nothing of this. You will bear the guilt of your lie in silence, and you will treat him to the most magnificent nal of his life, and then right before you are ready to leave, you will give him..." She walked over to the Femor, stole a cluster of Cobalt Grapes from her plate and GuideMa uttered her irritation,

but Kabal ignored her and said, "...these fruit of the vine." "I don't understand," Pluck spoke as she wiped her eyes dry. "You will understand..." Kabal stated as she reached into her own bosom and removed a small crystal bottle. She dripped some of its contents on the grapes and then handed them to Pluck and told her, "My brother will sleep for a sun's cycle once he eats these. He will wake long after you are gone." "Why do you have such liquid?" Pluck questioned her. Kabal glanced at the Femor, then knelt to Pluck, and leaned to her ear, whispering, "I acquired these from a peddler who was in a hurry but didn't mind stopping long enough to take my gold. Gamemnon has made me the fool for the last time." She straightened, turned to the Femor, and inquired, "Will you tell your Duke of this?" "I don't know," GuideMa replied. "It all depends on what happens this sun's cycle." Kabal wasn't sure what she meant by that but left it at that and turned her attention back to the Woman, "Go now. Spend what time you have left with him." Pluck took the grapes by their stem, and then she said, "You already had this plan in mind so you said all of those things before because you wanted to make me cry?" GuideMa spoke, "I quite enjoyed it." Kabal replied, "I did. I was right about you. You are going to hurt my brother." "I didn't intend to," Pluck told her. "I only wanted to experience what it would be like to be his betrothed." "Your heart is too pure for your own good," Kabal told her. "If I had a pure heart, I would never have lied to your brother," Pluck told her as she looked to the grapes and said, "I don't think I can do this to him. It's almost like I'm poisoning him." "Drug his mind with those orbs or drug his heart with your words. You will be poisoning him either way with your departure. Unless we can come up with a story that's believable." "You want me to tell more lies?" Pluck questioned her. "It's the only way to keep a lie alive." "I hate this. I hate all of this," Pluck said as she stood unable to remain seated. She turned and leaned on the Howdah as she held the rose in one hand and the grapes in the other, and she spoke, "The lie was so simple. Why are all these plays needed to keep the lie from being discovered so elaborate?" "It is the way of deception. Now stop your complaining. You have work to do," Kabal ordered her. Pluck leapt down and left. "I don't understand you," GuideMa spoke. "What don't you understand?" Kabal questioned. "When did you become friends with the vile Woman?" GuideMa inquired of her. Kabal started to deny it, and then she merely said, "I don't know if I'm capable of being someone's friend. I do place myself ahead of everyone else in my life." "Do you really? How are you benefiting from this current action of yours?" "I can't have my brother sulking, but I guess that can't be helped now. I am doing this to keep my love-blinded fool of a brother from being killed. I benefit by having my brother still with me." She paused and then Kabal inquired, "What about you? Do you still see Pluck as your enemy? You told me you wanted to discover why you suggested to Tabitha that Pluck be called Alba. Have you uncovered the reason?" "I have not and that irritates me more than you can know," she replied. "I guess you can be grateful for one thing out of all of this." "What is that?" GuideMa replied, "At least now you won't have the Woman as a sister." "Sister?" "If she had wed your brother, Pluck would have become your sister by law." "We can't have that," Kabal uttered more devastated by the fact than pleased with the outcome. "I could never be sisters with a vile Woman."

Chapter Seven

When You Have To Say Goodbye

Pluck ran as soon as she hit the ground, and she passed Zenba and Zung DraKa, and she kept going till she caught up to the Duke's. She motioned to the Aviatrix and she fluted the DraKa to stop. Pluck climbed into the Howdah. "You have finally returned to me," Votar told her. "I thought I might have to pick you up again and carry you back here." She flushed when she remembered the last time he did so, and then Pluck changed the subject and said, "I did make a promise." "Have you brought me a gift?" Votar inquired of her. "You hold my gift in one hand and something I really enjoy in the other." She stared at the Cobalt Grapes and then looked to the rose that was the symbol of his love and the oath they had taken to marry. Guilt pressed upon her heart again and before she knew it, the Cobalt Grapes slipped from her grasp. Votar rushed to the side and saw the grapes trampled by the DraKa, and then he said, "What a waste. No matter. I still have you so you will have to do to nibble on." Pluck giggled at such a coy comment and then she grabbed hold of his hand to find strength in what she needed to tell him. She had no words that could convey her sorrow over her lie and that she would have to leave him and the beautiful dream of being together. Votar turned her gently so she would face him, and then he leaned to her to kiss her. She thought about her curse and the slight chance this kiss of love would take away the form that had allowed her to save so many. Pluck remembered both times when they were on the Cascade Terrace where he professed his undying love and hatred for her. She also looked ahead into existence and saw the moment she would have to leave him. Pluck couldn't let this tender expression of affection be pressed between them, so she put her fingers to his lips, not as a rejection of what the kiss implied but as a way to atone for what she must do to him. "Don't you wish to kiss me?" Votar questioned her. "Are you perhaps thinking of when I first tried to kiss you?" "I am, but I am also thinking of a tradition from my homeland as it involves the Kiss. Would you be so against waiting till the sun's cycle we are wed." "Wait..?" he uttered, then took her hand tenderly in his, and kissed it. "A small sacrifice but I can wait." The horrors that awaited her rushed through her defenses and annihilated her will to go through with leaving all of them, and she asked, "Can you hold me?" Votar wrapped his arms around her, and she encompassed his love, taking in as much of it as she could to regain her strength. She loved him so much and found her future action unbearably cruel. Pluck wanted to cry, she wanted to bare her soul and her grief and share it with him, but it wasn't time for that yet. She still needed to tell him she had lied to him and that she must leave him. The Aviatrix halted their Draka. "What is it?" Votar inquired of the driver as he pulled away from Pluck enough so that he could be heard. "I was requested to stop so that a passenger could join us," the Aviatrix replied. With the aid of his guards, Kabal climbed up the ladder into their Howdah as her brother moved to assist her in boarding. "I'm surprised to see you join us," Votar told his sister. "What have I missed?" Kabal mostly questioned Pluck. She didn't know what to say to the Duchess as she glanced at the edge of the Howdah where she either purposely or accidentally dropped the Cobalt Grapes. GuideMa had informed the Duchess she had seen the Woman drop the grapes from the perch of their own Howdah, and Kabal decided she would have to act for the sake of her brother. She had already considered taking up such an interference, knowing Pluck may not go forward with the

plan. Kabal decided to see just how far Pluck had gotten with her confession, and she inquired, "Am I to understand you have decided to marry this vile Woman?" "You understand right," Votar answered. "So please do not call her such in my presence." "I disapprove of your union. Will you still marry her?" Kabal questioned him. Votar replied, "I will." She turned to Pluck and inquired of her, "What has she said to this? Is she all for your union?" She couldn't look at the Duchess since Kabal knew her secret and somehow had found out she wouldn't be going through with drugging her brother. "She accepted my flower," Votar said as he took Pluck's free hand. Kabal turned and glared at her, not with disgust but for completely forfeiting their plan. Kabal was glad she had made it in time before Pluck did something that couldn't be undone. "As much as it grieves me to hear you say such a thing, I can't deny protocol," Kabal told her brother as she started her part she must now play. She walked over to the tray where a pitcher of wine was set up along with some glasses. She poured her brother and Pluck a glass, then returned to the tray, and poured herself a glass. Kabal lifted her glass and said, "Let us raise our cups to celebrate." Votar clinked his glass to his sister's and then to Pluck's and then he took a drink. Pluck's face ashened as she realized what his sister had most likely done, but it was too late to stop it, not without a fuss. Kabal leaned to her and said, "Say your goodbyes quickly. You don't have much time now. I will say my goodbye to you, ...Alba." The Duchess pulled back from Pluck and looked at her with an expression Pluck didn't understand. The name Alba was a curse and yet Kabal had said it as if they were dear friends who would depart and never see each other again. Pluck wanted to cry and embrace Kabal but knew if she did such a thing, it would give away all. If she cried, it would only make Votar want to know what his sister had done to her, and how could she tell him that someone who she thought only hated her and wished her ill, was saying her final goodbye with compassion and care? Pluck bit down on her lip to keep from crying and Kabal quickly turned away from her as if she would also cry. "I will leave now, but know I will not stop until I have broken up your union or you are wed," Kabal spoke, then excused herself, the DraKa stopped, and she left the Howdah. GuideMa looked over the Duchess once she boarded their Howdah, and she said, "There is something different about you." Kabal took her hand as she helped her into the large box as she questioned her, "What do you mean?" Their Aviatrix used her flute to signal the other DraKas and the convoy went on their way. "I can't quite describe it. You were all furious when you left, muttering something about having to fix the vile Woman's conscience, but now that you have returned, you're..." "It doesn't matter what I am," Kabal said as she sat in the back seats and relaxed back. "I have put Alba back on the path she needs to take." A tear trickled down her cheek and she quickly wiped it away before she said, "I have made sure she goes to her doom." "I get it now," GuideMa said. "Poor... poor... Duchess... You have finally realized what the Woman means to you." "Be quiet!" Kabal snapped. "Your Alba... your friend... You must be wondering just how wicked of a person you are," GuideMa spoke with harshness towards her. "She wanted to tell Votar all and you wouldn't let her." "I said be quiet! I know how wicked I am. You don't need to tell me. I know what Alba means to me, and believe it or not, I did this for her. She selflessly exchanged her life for ours. I couldn't let her misguided sense of what is right get in the way. I know my brother and this was the only way to keep him from going after her. Now be quiet! I have to come to terms with what I've done, and I don't think I can."

Earlier on Votar and Pluck's DraKa...

"That was very unusual," Votar spoke as he went and sat in the seat and patted the cushion beside him. Pluck went and sat next to him as she inquired, "What was?" "My sister's actions. All her words were supposed to be hate-filled, but all I heard..." "I know," Pluck interrupted him. "I noticed the same thing." She wiped away a tear before he noticed as she said, "I believe Kabal is finally starting not to hate me." "My sister has a very big heart that she likes to hide, and in time, I believe she will become a friend to you." He noticed Pluck's tail as it laid on her lap, and he asked, "Do you mind? I would like to examine this sign I have only seen." She shook her head, and he took her tail gently in his hand and stroked the puffball like tip. It tickled a bit so Pluck laughed, then he took his hand and stroked it slowly along her tail from the middle to its tip. Her heart thundered in her chest as he did so and as she watched him, his eyes started to droop. Votar leaned over and laid his head on her lap and she stroked his platinum hair. She continued to do so for several mites as he stroked her tail, then he peered up at her, lifted his head up, and she put both her hands around his head and leaned in to kiss him, forgetting her fears and guilt. He fell hard into sleep before their lips met, and Pluck kissed him on the forehead instead. She carefully set his head down and stroked his hair again. After about ten mites, she lifted his head, stood, and set his head on a cushion. Pluck stared at him for a few moments more, set the white rose on his chest, and started to leave the Howdah. She turned, rushed back to him, and wrapped her arms around him, embracing him one last time. She wanted to cry but held it in. Pluck knew she would lose her resolve if even one tear fell while she was by his side. She kissed him on the cheek, took the rose, and quickly left the Howdah. Pluck made her way into a thicket of bushes and waited for the DraKa convoy to walk past, then she left her hiding spot and started back towards the encampment. She walked for a few mites and then Fairah appeared from behind a tree and approached her. "Did ye think ye could leave without me knowing?" Fairah questioned her. Pluck smiled near tears as she said, "No. I just couldn't face you, if I had, you would have known right away what I was going to do." "Are ye returning to the Shadow Races and the Cursed?" Fairah inquired heavy with grief. "I made a deal with a few of the Shadow people. They agreed to let everyone in the encampment go if I will return to them," Pluck answered still hiding the terrible truth from her adopted mother. Fairah questioned her, "Why did they not kill ye right away?" "I'm not completely sure. The one known as Malus seemed to want to test me for some reason. Another one known as Abhora quoted some sort of prophecy concerning the false Serviatrix." "I wish to go with you," Fairah told her. "You can't." "I wish to destroy all who would hurt ye," Fairah told her still fighting back her own grief and despair. "You can't. I must keep my promise. I must go to them. I must go alone." "I am like Votar. I do not know if I can let ye go. Ye are my adopted... no... Ye are my daughter and I love ye. I should go and die in ye's place." "You're my mother. How can I allow you to make such a sacrifice?" Pluck questioned her. "I'm the one who went and faced the Shadow, so I am the one who should..." Fairah interrupted her, "Ye only went alone for ye would allow none other to go with ye." Pluck rushed over to her and embraced her as she said, "Please... don't make this any harder than it already is. I have to do this. I already told them I would return if they would allow all of those in the encampment to go free and that includes you. It's a small price for all those who were saved." "How long will they remain safe if the Shadow and Cursed kill ye? Ye are the Serviatrix. Ye must save Wellspring." "You told me that the Great Creator sees all and knows all. If he intended for me to save Wellspring, do you think He would let me die? You have to trust as I do that this is the right thing. You must let me go as I forced Votar to do so. I want to know that

you're safe and your powers can help save Wellspring." Pluck pulled from her mother's embrace, smiled, and said, "The Serviatrix will have need of you when the Cursed and Shadow decide to attack again." "The Serviatrix..? Ye do not speak of ye's self. Ye speak of Tabitha. Ye do not believe ye are the true Serviatrix?" She took both of Fairah's hands into hers and said, "What matters is when the time comes, you're there for the Serviatrix. The Serviatrix will need your guidance. She'll be afraid to face the Shadow and the Cursed when the time comes, so promise me you will be there for her." "I promise," Fairah vowed. "I promise to lend my wisdom and strength to the Serviatrix." Pluck released her hands and said, "I love you." Fairah tried not to cry as she said, "I love ye also." Pluck left and a few mites later, JuJu joined Fairah. "I am surprised ye let her go," he told her. "I never intended to," Fairah told him. "But even I must have faith." JuJu asked her, "Do ye believe she shall return to ye?" "I pray she shall. I pray with all my heart she shall." JuJu reached over and squeezed her hand as he said, "I shall pray with ye." Pluck continued for the encampment, wiping away tears she could no longer hold back. "You actually left," the Shadow KellyZing spoke as he joined her, fluttering by her side and casting a sickly green glow. "I thought I might have to call the others and have them slaughter your whole convoy." "I said I would keep my promise," Pluck told him. "I'm very good at keeping my promises." "Good..." he scoffed. "Try not to say such words where we are going. Those who fear the light and those who hide from it do not like such words, not that you have long to worry about such things." He lifted high in the air and said, "Continue on your path. I fly ahead to inform the others of your return. Know I will see you if you should return to your friends or try to flee us." The Shadow KellyZing flew off. "Lux..?" Pluck whispered. "I am here with you," he said, and she immediately found comfort in those words. "What should I do with you? I don't want the enemy to acquire you after my... end." "I choose who I give my power to," the Lux told her. "Keep me with you, and I will be by your side till the end." "Thank you," Pluck told him and then removed a pouch that contained Fairah's crystal tears. She considered removing the tears and holding on to them as they contained her mother's joy. Pluck needed strength to complete the last trek of her commitment and didn't know if she had the will to continue on her own. She opened the pouch to remove them when another started to accompany her. "I didn't think you would join me again," Pluck told the Femor. GuideMa informed her, "I am a witness to your end, so I need to be there when you die." "It's selfish of me, but I'm glad you're here," Pluck told her as she pulled the string to the pouch, sealing the crystal tears within. "Why is that selfish of you?" GuideMa questioned. Pluck tucked the pouch in her belt as she answered, "Most likely we're both going to die." They walked for a few mites more in silence as GuideMa tried to figure out the one she despised so much, the one her Duke wanted to eliminate. "Do you believe as you said?" GuideMa finally questioned her. "You told the Immortal that you believe the Great Creator will save you from the Shadow." "No, I said if I was the true Serviatrix, He wouldn't let me perish by the hands of the Shadow. I believe I'm the False One, so I don't know what the Great Creator has in store for my life. I'm most likely walking my last path in this life," Pluck spoke, then glanced at her, and said, "I'm still so glad you came." "Why is that?" "If someone wasn't with me, I think I might run away from what's coming. You're forcing me to face what's ahead." GuideMa folded two of her arms as she said, "I doubt you would ever run away from anything." "We will see. I have yet to turn myself over to the Shadow." "Is it hard to leave your friends behind?" "Very," Pluck admitted. "I never said goodbye to Quip, Staunch, or Healen. I got a chance to see Zenba and Zung one last time, but I couldn't let them know it would be our last. And Kabal..." She didn't

finish, so GuideMa inquired, "What about the Duchess?" "Kabal called me Alba again." "Why should that concern you? Alba is a curse and your name as a servir," GuideMa spoke, searching for the meaning that wasn't uttered. "I know it's some sort of curse and the name now belongs to me as Tabitha's servir, but when Kabal said it... I almost got this feeling... this sense... she was uttering it because..." "Because of what?" GuideMa inquired when she didn't finish. "Never mind. It's silly... In Kabal's mind, we could never be friends." GuideMa considered telling Pluck why Kabal had first called her Alba, but she thought it wasn't her place and she didn't want to give the vile Woman any comfort. She also considered she might have to explain herself for suggesting the name to Tabitha, so GuideMa remained silent on that matter. "You haven't mentioned Votar," GuideMa said. "I would have thought he would have been the first person you would talk about." "I can't talk about him," Pluck said. "If I mention his name or think too long on him, I'll die right here. I have to keep going and focus on arriving at my destination. I can't consider what I would have had with him." She started to weep, "I can't consider all that I've lost. It took so long for us to come to terms with our emotions and now... I can't think of such things. I can't..." Pluck stifled her sadness and her weeping as she spoke, "I must numb myself to everything and prepare myself for my end." She turned to GuideMa and said, "You've walked with me far enough. Go to your Duke. Tell him I have met a horrible end." "I can't do that. I'm a wit..." "How can you be a witness if you die and can tell no one of what you saw? Leave me! This dark path is one I chose, and I should walk it alone." GuideMa questioned her, "What will you do to me to prevent me from going any further? Will you drug me as you drugged your love? Will you strike me and tie me to a tree?" Pluck's shame silenced her, and she couldn't answer the Femor as they walked on. The six nals elapsed, and GuideMa and Pluck arrived at the encampment. They walked through the tents and reached the other side and started through the Crimson Grass once again. They walked for ten more mites before they encountered the scouting party of the Shadow. "You have returned to me," Malus said. "Now, I want you to surrender to me."

* * *

On board the Seahorn...

Lady Flaxen, Virago, and Adroit were on deck again as the new morning came. Adroit played with her wooden toys as Virago and Flaxen sipped on some Chip Tea. Virago stood and walked as she sipped on the unsweetened brew she was thankful for. A sailor came up on deck swaying about as if he'd forgotten his sea legs. He had broken into the captain's cabin and taken for himself a bottle of rum. The drunken sailor walked over to the little girl. "What are you playing at?" the drunken sailor asked. "I would say soldier but you only have a cow and a horse." The guards with Flaxen started to move to intercept the man, but the sailor reached out and grabbed ahold of Adroit's arm before they reached him. The sailor grabbed the child more forceful than he intended, and Adroit let out a frightened hiss and her face flashed a glimpse of her true form beneath her camouflage. The drunken sailor stumbled back and let out a frightened cry as the soldiers completely surrounded the child and came to her aid. "Monster!" the drunk sailor screamed. "She's a monster!" The soldiers and Flaxen were not sure why the sailor cried out so, but one other had seen the change in the child's appearance. Virago had strolled by the ship's railing as the drunken sailor had approached. She had turned and witnessed the horrible sight,

and Virago froze in place as she became a witness to this shocking revelation. She never said a word. She just stared at Adroit as she couldn't accept the horrible jolt to her world, and she dropped her teacup. "A monster!" the sailor repeated. Adroit turned in fear and grabbed hold of Flaxen so the Lady would shield her from the shouting man. A guard drew his dagger in case the sailor became too unruly. The sailor backed up and pointed at the child as he said, "I tell you that... that thing is not one of us." No one believed him but one, and the soldiers moved to secure the sailor before he hurt someone. "Wait! He speaks the truth," Virago finally said. "She... Adroit is not a little girl... she is... she is something else." Everyone drew a blade, whether sword or dagger and pointed it at the little girl as she held on to Flaxen and buried her tiny head in her dress. "What are you doing?" Flaxen questioned them. "Have you all gone mad?" Virago feared for the safety of her best friend as she realized the assassin they had been searching for all along most likely was this small creature. "Release Lady Flaxen," Virago ordered. "Adroit, release my friend now!" She turned her tiny head and peered at Virago, then she slowly did as commanded, and took a step back into the group who surrounded her. "What are your orders, my Empress?" a guard questioned. Virago didn't know what to say as she stared at the frightened Adroit. "Kill it," the drunken sailor uttered. "What is going on?" Vim questioned as he approached with his group of assassin hunters. "I discovered the killer," the drunken sailor slurred out as he pointed an accusing finger. "It hides within this child!" Adroit's instincts kicked in and her true form appeared again for a few moments as she turned to flee. Vim and his men also saw her real appearance as they came up behind her, and he seized her by her arms as she took on her guise again. "Kill it," the drunken sailor uttered. "Yes, we should kill it," one of the guards yelled. Many approached as the commotion drew their attention, and a small crowd gathered, and Edward, Fracas, and Ardor were among them. "Kill it now," the drunken sailor urged them. "What is going on?" Edward demanded. Vim explained what he knew. "Are we sure she is not a little girl?" Edward questioned. "Her wound," Virago spoke still in shock. "She has a wound on her hand that is not right." Ardor moved over to Adroit, removed her bandages, and then lifted her little hand so all could see the blood that was unnatural. "It has to be killed," the drunken sailor screamed. "It killed one of us!" Edward peered around and saw that everyone was angry except for two. Virago and Flaxen were in shock. He decided for the sake of his wife he would delay any action and ordered, "Take her to the brig." "Should we not kill this assassin here?" Fracas questioned. "We might be able to acquire valuable information from her," Edward said. "Take her below and place her in the brig." Fracas implemented his orders. Edward moved to his wife, took her by the hand, and inquired, "Are you all right?" "Adroit did not hurt me," Virago replied. "I did not mean that," Edward stated. "I know how you feel about the child. How are you taking this?" "Child..?" Virago repeated. "Was that a child?"

Later that sun's cycle...

The brig of the Seahorn...

Virago waited till two Morgog soldiers were on duty guarding Adroit, then Virago snuck down there alone, and had the guards leave. Adroit was in the corner of the dark cell, sitting against the corner in a fetal position. Virago stared at her, not knowing why she was there, and she started to leave, but then she turned around and questioned, "Are you the one who killed the sailor?" "I did not kill the Man you speak of," Adroit replied. "I was going to. I had prepared myself

to do so for I was so hungry but others came who were very mad. They took down the prey instead of me." "Do not lie to me," Virago spoke. "I will not lie to you," Adroit told her. "You are of import..." she started to say but then she didn't finish her sentence. "I have been told that the man's arm was torn off," Virago spoke as she moved to the bars and grabbed hold of the cold metal. "What did you do with his arm?" "I ate it," Adroit replied. "I was hungry. The others spoke of throwing the body overboard when no one would see them, so I hurried and took what I could. I am small. I could only carry his arm." Virago put a hand over her mouth to stifle a shocked gasp as her heart sunk, hearing her confession. She prayed she had imagined what she saw on deck or that she had dreamed the whole thing. Virago started to cry, and Adroit peered up at her, realizing she was the cause of her sorrow. Despair sunk in, and the child tried to pull herself further into the corner to make her existence disappear, but Adroit could do no such thing. Virago stopped her weeping. There would be plenty of time for that later, and she began to pace the room to keep from going mad as she inquired, "How did you really acquire the cut on your palm?" Adroit didn't reply as she bowed her head ashamed of what she was. "Tell me!" Virago yelled. "I told you the truth when you questioned me before," Adroit began. "I had gotten hungry, so I went in search of prey. I took the knife. I am small so it's hard for me to take prey down by myself. There was a Man in the place where your food is. I snuck up behind him, but then... I thought about you and Lady Flaxen, how upset you would be with me if I did such a thing so I left the Man alone. I went to put the knife back and the ship rocked and caused me to drop the knife. I cut myself." Virago continued to pace as she questioned, "Why did you come on board? Who were you sent to kill?" "I was told to come on board," Adroit replied. "I was told to make my appearance pleasing to you and come on board and eat. I was not told who to eat." Virago controlled her emotions so she could continue her questioning, and she asked, "You do not look like us, do you? You are some sort of creature from Wellspring, are you not?" "I'm not a butterfly," Adroit replied. "I'm not pretty." "Are you a child? How old are you?" "I don't know my exact age but I am as I said. I'm about four." "When were you going to kill me? Or would you have killed my friend first?" Adroit didn't answer. "Tell me!" Virago yelled. Adroit remained silent. Virago took the key she had earlier requested from the guard, unlocked the cell, and went in with her lantern. Adroit stood as if she would run away, but instead, she stood there quivering in fright. Virago hung the lantern on a hook. "Show me your true form," Virago demanded of her. "I'm not a butterfly," Adroit warned her. "I'm not pretty." "Show me!" Virago screamed at her as she took her by the shoulders and shook her. Adroit's little girl form crawled away as her true form returned to the surface. Virago shrunk back from her, appalled to see a creature that was more snake than human. Cold green scales covered her where skin had once been. Her long blonde beautiful hair completely disappeared, and the big brown eyes of a child were replaced with hideous large red serpent eyes. "What are you? What sort of creature are you?" "I do not know my race. I have not come across any like myself. I do live among those who call them- selves the Shadow Races," Adroit replied and then she started to cry and tears streamed down her face as she said, "I'm not a butterfly. You can't love me. I can't be your daughter. I'm not a butterfly." Virago shook her head and released her, and then she ran out of the brig as she handed the keys back to a guard. Virago fled the area and ran to her own cabin and into the arms of her friend. She wept for several nals, and even Edward couldn't console her.

Later that evening in Edward's cabin...

He knew how fond his wife was of the girl and the shock it must have been for her to learn that the one she adored had been the Shadow Assassin hiding among them all along. Edward thought about many ways he could broach the subject, but could never solidify a gentle approach within his mind. They ate in silence, and Edward would have let the whole evening go by without a word, but his wife finally broke the stillness of tongues. "What are you going to do with Adroit?" Virago questioned him. "I have not decided yet. I do not know if we should even keep her on board anymore." Virago said, "I would like you to allow me to deal with her sentence and punishment." "Are you up to such a task?" Edward inquired, worried deeply for his wife's sanity and her heart. "I am. I took responsibility for her when she came aboard, and I shall continue to do so."

Chapter Eight

The Death Sentence

Far from Wellspring...

The deck of the Seahorn...

Six guards, a mixture of Fletching and Morgog, escorted Adroit up from the brig onto the deck. She was manacled, and many murmured amongst themselves as they saw her true reptilian form. They marched her to the top of the stairs on the bridge and turned her to face those who had gathered. Many expected to see a creature gloating in its small victory of staying on the ship so long without being detected. All they saw was a frightened creature. Edward and Virago stood at the top of the other set of stairs, and he spoke to the gathering, "We have captured the one who slew the sailor. This creature came on board with the mask of a child, but now you can see its true form. My wife has requested that she be allowed to judge and sentence Adroit since she was the one who took responsibility for her when she came aboard. I have granted her the right, and her judgements shall be final." Virago walked across the bridge to the top of the other set of stairs, and Adroit shrunk back as Virago neared her. The child seemed more terrified than before. "Lend me your knife," Virago commanded one of the Morgogs there. He gave it to her, and then Virago ordered, "Remove her shackles and grab her arms. Hold her tightly so that she cannot move." Two Fletchings did as commanded and removed the manacles that were much too big for Adroit's tiny wrists. Virago knelt down so that she was level with the creature, and she stared into her large serpent eyes that were redder than before for the child had been crying. Virago lifted her voice and spoke, "Adroit is from a group from Wellspring who call themselves the Shadow Races." Virago turned to her and spoke to Adroit, "You boarded this ship and many believe you took the life of a member of this crew. A price must be paid for the death of the sailor, and it shall be paid." Virago paused and then she continued, "You tore off the arm of the dead sailor and ate of his flesh, a most vile and apprehensible act. You must pay for that crime." She questioned the small creature, "What do you think I should do to you for your punishment?" Adroit couldn't answer her, she was too afraid to speak. Virago straightened, turned, and faced the crowd and questioned, "What price is there?" "Blood!" a sailor shouted.

"We should have its blood!" Many agreed with him. "Blood payment," Virago repeated as she turned to Adroit. "I shall give you your blood payment." Virago knelt to the frightened creature again, took the knife and placed the blade to her throat as she whispered, "There are consequences for all actions. You committed a crime and now blood must be spilt." Virago peered into the creature's face, looking for the small blonde girl she had let into her heart. All she saw was a scaled creature with eyes that frightened her. A sailor yelled, "We must have blood!" "Blood you shall have!" Virago shouted as she pushed up her sleeve, then took the blade, and cut her own left palm. She stood and showed her hand to the crowd, then made a fist, and let the blood flow down her palm, wrist, forearm, then elbow, allowing it to drip to the deck. Virago glanced at Edward so that he wouldn't do anything, and she had already informed Lady Flaxen what she had planned. She considered it all night. "I shall pay with my blood until all are satisfied," Virago declared as her red liquid continued to drip to the deck. "I shall bleed till none complain." No one spoke for a few mites as all were shocked by her actions to save the creature. "It is enough!" Vim yelled. "Please, my Empress, cover your wound." Many echoed his statement. "Are there any who must have more blood?" Virago questioned them, and then she demanded, "Speak now!" No one said a word. She nodded to Lady Flaxen who hurried over to her and bandaged her wound. Virago turned to the crowd again and said, "You called for blood and blood was paid. None can mention Adroit's crimes again and if anyone should, their blood shall be required. Her crimes are no more so they are not to be whispered or spoken of again. I so decree as Empress Virago." She paused for a few moments, and then she said, "There is a tradition among the Morgog royalty. We can induct any we see fit into our family by adoption." She had taken her thumb and smeared blood on it before Flaxen tended to her wound, and Virago knelt to Adroit and placed a circle of blood on her forehead and declared, "I take this child of shadow and proclaim her as mine. She is my daughter, and I her mother. If any should hurt her, they shall perish; they and all their household." "What is the Empress doing?" a High Guard questioned a Morgog Sentinel. "Empress Virago has placed the circle of protection on the creature. None can harm her now, not without forfeiting their own lives and the lives of all they hold dear." "Can she do that?" the High Guard questioned. "That thing murdered a member of the crew and it is not even of our own race." "It is done," the Morgog Sentinel replied. "Best to keep your grumblings to yourself if you hold anything of value, including your own life." Virago commanded, "Release her. Lady Flaxen take Adroit to our cabin." Flaxen did as ordered and took the child below. Virago addressed the gathering, "You all see a monster in that small child. You see an assassin who wants to destroy us. I see only a frightened child." "She is not of our kind!" a sailor yelled. "How can you adopt such a thing?" Virago replied, "Do we only do good to those who look like us? Are we not taught to treat all living creatures with respect? I do not expect for any of you to forgive her or accept her, but you shall show her respect. This is my command as Empress." "Heed my wife's word," Edward commanded as he moved to her side. "Adroit is the Empress' daughter and now Adroit is my daughter. My anger shall be swift on any that bring about the Empress' wrath." The gathering dispersed, but their murmurings remained.

Mites later...

Lady Flaxen and Virago's cabin...

Virago entered the cabin and found Adroit in the arms of Flaxen as the Lady tried to console the crying child. "Adroit..," Virago spoke. The child turned when her name was called. "Come to me," Virago said. Adroit slowly walked over to her and looked up at the Empress. "Do you know what has happened?" Virago questioned her. "I'm not sure. I was to be killed but then you hurt yourself and caused yourself pain." "I did," Virago told her. "I did it for you, so it did not hurt as much." Adroit said, "I don't understand." "Do you remember me telling you that I was going to make you my daughter?" "I do," Adroit replied. "I have done so," Virago told her. "You are now Adroit, Daughter of the Empress." "But I'm not a butterfly," the little girl spoke. "I'm only what you see." "You are right. You do not understand. You are a butterfly," Virago spoke as she knelt to her and put a hand to her scaled cheek. "The Adroit who is before me is the butterfly." "I don't understand," the little girl repeated as she wrapped her arms around her and wept. "You are of importance to me," Virago told her. "I love you." "But I am of the Shadow." "Do you want to remain of the Shadow?" Adroit thought about it, and then she answered, "No." "There are things that you have been taught by the Shadow that you shall not be allowed to do anymore, and one of them is eating any of the races. I forbid you to do such things from this point on. Do you understand?" Virago questioned her. "I believe I do." "There are other things the Shadow may have taught you that might also have to change but we shall work on those things slowly." Adroit asked, "Do you want me to take on the appearance that I had?" "No, I want you to remain as you were born. This is you, and this is the you that I love. It pleases me for you to remain as you were born." "I don't understand," Adroit said once again. "It is fine that you do not understand right now. Understanding shall come with time. It shall be hard to be my daughter. Many shall not like you." "I already know hatred. I am not afraid. I am only afraid of the other. I'm afraid of love. You are of importance to me. I've been taught that it's a weakness. I've been taught that love will bring about my destruction." "Some might see it that way, but love is a strength," Virago told her. "Love is the most powerful force of all. Now allow Lady Flaxen to wash your face." "Will she not wash off the mark you placed on me?" Adroit asked as she touched her forehead. "No one has the power to wash off that mark for that mark has sunk deep within yourself. You are my daughter now, and no one can change that." "Yes... mother..." Adroit spoke. "You are of great importance to me, so I will make sure never to disappoint you." "I am pleased that you want to try. There is much ahead of us, but we shall face it together."

Below deck, the holy men's cabin...

High Priest Sagax slept soundly in his bunk as Monk Sophis returned to their cabin. "Did you get it?" Priest Fallac whispered. Sophis held out his hand and the Priest took his ring and the gold coins back. "Did you have any problems?" Fallac whispered. "No, I just did as I did before, but added something for a little show. It should throw the Fletching mongrels off our scent."

Later that evening in Edward's cabin...

They ate as usual and this time, it was Edward who was unusually quiet. Virago questioned him, "What do you think of the measures I have taken concerning Adroit?" "I am not sure," Edward admitted. "She is of the Shadow Races, and we have learned from her that they mean to start a war with Man again. How do we know for sure where her loyalty lies?" "A simple thing of importance," Virago answered with a smile. He spoke, "I do not follow you." "The concept of love. It is not practiced among the Shadow. The word is not even mentioned; it is only said that to have

one of importance is a weakness, so to the Shadow love is a weakness. I believe Adroit has come to discover to have one of importance is a strength. I believe she loves me and Lady Flaxen. I hope to kindle that love toward you and you towards her. There is no rush. We can work on this once we reach Fletching." "I should warn you," he said. "My mother the Queen shall in no way ever accept someone, not of royal blood, and my mother shall not accept someone who is not of Man. I want you to know this so expected a shunning from the royal court of Fletching." "Morgog shall be no different," Virago said. "I believe we are less understanding than the Fletching people." "My mother can be very vicious to anyone she dislikes in the least." "I already expected she may not like me. I can now expect that she most likely shall not like me or our daughter." Edward chuckled to himself and then mumbled, "Daughter... The concept shall take getting used to for all of us." She took a few bites of her meal, and then she said, "I am only concern with you. Can you accept Adroit as she is? I claimed her as my daughter without consulting you even after we discovered what she is." "I have already accepted her for your sake," he replied. "The time I have spent with..." Edward started to say Pluck, but instead, he spoke, "I have grown accustomed to such creatures with the time I have spent on Wellspring. It is the concept of daughter that shall take some time. Usually, a man has over half a season to become accustomed that he shall soon become a father." "The way we have been at it these evenings you may soon expect another child to be on his or her way," Virago spoke with a coy smile, then stood, walked over to him, and stretched out her hand to him and asked, "Shall we make another attempt?" He took her hand and stood, but then a knock on the door disturbed their would-be bonding. "Edward," Ardor shouted through the door. "We have found another dead sailor. He is the one who grabbed Adroit, and my lord, one of his arms is missing."

* * *

Wellspring...

Some distance from the encampment...

"You have returned to me. I am very pleased," Malus shouted as the False One and the Witness approached him through the Crimson Grass. "Now, I want you to surrender to me." Pluck glanced at GuideMa, and then she inquired, "What will you do to the Witness?" Malus said, "If you are so concerned with her, you should not have brought her along." "This Witness has a mind of her own and I couldn't deter her," Pluck replied, and then she pleaded, "Please spare her life. A Witness is only a witness if they remain alive." "I will consider your request," Malus told her. "Now come and surrender to me." "What is the proper way for me to surrender to you?" Pluck questioned as she moved towards him and GuideMa stayed behind. "I was never taught such etiquette." "Kneel before me, and I will take your head," Malus told her. The other Shadow people drew their weapons as they would take a part of this Necrom and make the flesh and/or bone their own. Pluck saw their faces mad with carnage, and she lifted the white rose she carried all this way with her, and took once more of its scent. She walked a few more paces, knelt before Malus, bowed her head and closed her eyes, and waited for her end. Malus drew his long dagger and the blade glowed with Maag-neg as he lifted it high and the others of the Shadow began to crowd around the False One as if they were fangs ready to devour her. They would feast on their enemy tonight. GuideMa watched in horror, and it panged her heart to see such a thing, and tears began to flow down her cheeks. She took one step towards Pluck as if she would

run to her rescue, but she knew she was powerless to do anything. GuideMa stood there as she had come, she stood there and bore witness to what would come. Malus gazed at his prey with delight, and then he swiped his long dagger across Pluck's neck.

The End

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